Development of a Strategy for Higher Education into the 1990s

The UGC's letter of 1st November printed below opens up a national debate on the future of higher education. It contains 28 questions, mixing two separate elements. Firstly, the University of Sussex is asked to respond to two specific questions (numbers 1 and 2) about the future of the University. Secondly, groups and individuals within and without the University (as well as the University as such, if it wishes) are invited to participate by submitting comments and suggestions to the UGC, preferably with reference to the other 24 questions.

The Vice-Chancellor will be proposing to the Planning Committee, Senate and Council later this term a procedure and timetable for the University to respond to questions 1 and 2. It is likely to consist of a discussion document, incorporating draft answers, being considered and refined through the normal Spring Term committee cycle. It will be suggested that the formal University response should be restricted to questions 1 and 2. Please note that THIS WILL BE THE ONLY CIRCULATION OF THE UGC LETTER, e.g. when the topics appear on committee agendas it will be assumed that members will have retained this Bulletin Extra for reference.

The UGC letter is being published now in order to ENCOURAGE COMMITTEES, UNITS, GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS WITHIN THE UNIVERSITY TO CONSIDER MAKING SUBMISSIONS TO THE UGC AND TO GIVE THEM AS MUCH TIME TO DO SO AS POSSIBLE. Such submissions will stand in the name of the originating body, and we hope that they will be made to co-ordinate them across the University as such to pass them through the committee system. Ordinators should not therefore phrase their comments or suggestions as recommendations to the Senate, the Council, etc. nor should they seek validation of their suggestions from other university bodies; the committee business cycle will be fully stretched to deal with questions 1 and 2. Please note that although submissions can continue to be made up to the end of March, the UGC has asked for them as soon as possible.

Although submissions should be addressed to the UGC contributors are asked either to pass them through the VICE-CHANCELLOR'S OFFICE, or to inform that office that they have made a submission, so that the University can know the extent and timing of the responses. We may also be required to provide information about the topics and questions prior to making submissions to consult with the member of the Administration responsible for supporting their body (e.g. Arts and Social Studies: R.I.M. Jamieson; Science: J.H. Parrant; Community Services: P.A. Tear).

Although any body may make a submission on any topic, it is hoped that certain committees will cover certain questions as a minimum, e.g. Council (Q04,13), Arts and Science Committees (Q08,12), Admissions Committee (Q05,24,25), Schools of Studies (Q026,27). There is no Q23.

Registrar & Secretary

Dear Vice-Chancellor/Principal,

DEVELOPMENT OF A STRATEGY FOR HIGHER EDUCATION INTO THE 1990S

Introduction

You will probably have seen already the recent exchange of correspondence between the Secretary of State for Education and Science and my predecessor; however, for ease of reference, I attach a copy to Annex A. The Secretary of State asks for a debate on the issues that face higher education over the next ten years; and he asks that this debate should be conducted in as open and wide-ranging a manner as possible. This letter is the Committee's first step towards encouraging such a debate.

1. The Committee will be giving the Secretary of State its advice not later than October 1984 and wishes to take full account of the contributions of universities and other interested parties. We could simply have invited comments on the Secretary of State's letter: but we believe it will be more helpful if we try to list the questions which we consider the Committee should cover in its advice and which participants in the debate should think about, whether or not they feel it reasonable for them to answer them at this stage.

2. With two exceptions, we do not ask your university as such to answer these questions, because there is likely to be a great diversity of views within each university and nothing will be gained by disputing this fact. The two exceptions are questions 1 and 2, which are addressed to institutions and not to groups within them. We would be grateful to receive replies to these two questions by 31 March 1984.

4. It is, of course, open to your university, if it wishes, to comment on any of the remaining questions; indeed we hope that it would at least be able to answer Questions 8 and 13. We would also ask you to encourage general debate on these issues within your university and we would welcome comments from groups and individuals, whether in the form of answers to particular questions or otherwise. Some of the questions - 4, for example - are ones on which we would particularly value the answers of those officers who have been concerned with the relevant problems. In particular, we hope that you yourself will be able to comment on some of the issues as an individual. In Questions 28 and 29, for example, the experience of Vice-Chancellors must give their views especial authority. Again we would ask for replies by 1st June 1984 but where it is possible we would appreciate earlier replies to spread the load.

5. The Secretary of State has asked the National Advisory Body for Local Authority Higher Education (NAB) to encourage the same kind of debate in respect of the public sector institutions for which it is responsible. NAB's first step has been to produce a consultation paper "Towards a Strategy for Local Authority Higher Education in the Late 1980s and Beyond"; and a copy of this is attached at Annex B. It is clear that there will have to be an eventual reconciliation between the replies of NAB and UGC to the Secretary of State.

6. Parts of this letter refer primarily to the situation in
Balance of subjects

13. The Secretary of State is anxious to see a shift towards technological, scientific and towards other vocationally relevant forms of study, and has asked how, and how fast, this can be achieved. He proposes that the balance of their admissions, so far as their accommodation permits, but this is often a feature of the teaching at smaller institutions. The Secretary of State also wishes to see a shift of balance among the first-class candidates. This would require changes in the schools or the provision of conversion courses.

Q.5. Does your experience suggest that there would be a demand among students for courses leading to what kind of institution might it be appropriate to provide them? Can you suggest any other way of meeting the Secretary of State's wishes?

16. Even without deliberate pressure, changes in student choice are likely to change the balance of demand from private sources, thus reducing their dependence on public funds.

Q.6. Which subjects do you expect to become more popular, and which less popular, over the next decade?

Q.7. Are there other reasons why you would wish to favour some subjects at the expense of others?

Research

17. In the natural sciences (in the widest sense) there is a reasonably clear distinction between scholarship and research. Scholarship means keeping abreast of the current state of one's own subject, and may include writing books and papers which explain and systematize what is already known. Research means discovering what is new. It is harder to draw this distinction in the social sciences. An academic may teach a large number of students that scholarship is part of the duty of every teacher in higher education (regardless of sector), and that higher education institutions must take steps to encourage research and to increase the research capacity in the university system. We have no hesitation in suggesting that scholarship is part of the duty of every teacher in higher education (regardless of sector), and that higher education institutions must take steps to encourage research and to increase the research capacity in the university system. We have no hesitation in suggesting that scholarship is part of the duty of every teacher in higher education (regardless of sector), and that higher education institutions must take steps to encourage research and to increase the research capacity in the university system.

Q.8. Do you think that this has happened in your institution? Have you had an initiative of the kind we have in mind in your case? If it has happened in your institution, are you planning or taking any steps to introduce the kind of changes which we have in mind?

Q.9. Do you think that the dual support system can survive and would you wish it to do so?

Q.10. Would you favour earmarking, or indicating, the research component of the DfE grant? If so, what items of expenditure would be covered by this earmarking or indicating?

Q.11. The Secretary of State has suggested that greater selectivity in the use of research funding might be considered within institutions and between institutions. What are your views on this?

Q.12. What priorities, if any, would you suggest for special research investment (beyond those already identified, such as microelectronics, information technology and biotechnology)?

Dependence on public funds

19. As I said in para. 7, the Secretary of State believes that universities ought to reduce their dependence on public funds which include student fees reimbursed by local education authorities. He has already held discussions about ways in which this might be achieved with a number of Vice-Chancellors, at which my predecessor was present. These discussions have not yet led to a clear or agreed solution, but it is apparent that any solution involves giving individual universities greater freedom from the control of the DfE and the DfES, and this is a policy which the Secretary of State is attracted for other reasons also.

Q.13. Are there respects in which you would wish your university to have greater freedom from the control of DfES and DfES and other non-financial advantages of this? And the non-financial advantages? Do you see any means of making this possible? Whether tied to specific purposes or not? Could the grants be improved by a change in the tax laws? If so, what?

The nature of universities

20. The binary line, and more generally the differences between universities and major public sector institutions, are currently a topic for debate. The differences which are of interest here for these differences can be considered - the interface with government and to which I revert in para. 19 - as showing the differences one of which is touched on in para. 21, and the differences of function.

Q.14. Is there an essential difference in function between universities and other institutions of higher education which would be regarded as a continuous spectrum of institutions?

Q.15. If there is an essential difference in their teaching function, what is it, and how, in measurable terms,
can one distinguish between those school-leavers who would benefit most from university-type education and those who would benefit most from other types of educational provision? There are several reasons for this:

Q.16. Should there be more variety among universities in respect, for example, of disciplinary specialisation, type of student (mature, overseas etc.), teaching style and involvement in research?

Q.17. Do you have views on a desirable balance in the university system, between provision for:

i. full-time, tutorial-based, courses?

ii. full-time, sandwich, part-time provision?

In what ways does your view of the desirable balance for the whole system differ from your view of the desirable balance for the system as a whole?

Validation

21. Almost all public sector courses are validated by external bodies — mainly by CRE and BTCE. Some university courses are validated in varying degree by professional bodies — in law, medicine or engineering, for example — and all university courses have external examiners who play a certain moderating role.

Q.18. What is your experience of the process of accreditation by professional bodies in those subjects in which they operate? What are your views on any other possible system of accreditation or validation of university courses?

Tenure and premature retirement

22. Universities largely coped with the 1961 cuts by means of early retirements. This has left an unbalanced age distribution of academic staff: detailed figures, broken down by subject, are given in Annex A. The Annex also shows how the overall age distribution will vary up to the end of the century, on the assumptions that each year's intake will be filled. This is essentially the assumption of constant level of support per student and constant student numbers. For comments on these assumptions see pages 7 and 9. Even on these assumptions the rate of new appointments in arts, for example, during the next decade will be between 14 and 15% per annum in the system as a whole; and in many universities it will be well below that. For comparison, in its proposal last year for 'new blood' posts the ABCR argued, and the DES accepted, that a replacement rate of 13% was the least that could keep a subject in good health. (The argument was concerned with research rather than teaching, and it was put forward only for the sciences; but this estimate remains the only one available).

23. For the next five years, therefore, the replacement rate of 13% would be slightly below the acceptable minimum even on the most favourable hypothesis (ie, that the level of support per student will be constant in real terms) and a nil replacement rate is not unlikely. The continuation of the 'new blood' scheme must be a possibility, even though it could involve the government giving new money with one hand while taking away existing money with the other. But if this happened it would almost certainly be operated in a highly selective way.

Q.19. Would you favour the continuation of the 'new blood' scheme? What do you see as its disadvantages and to what extent can they be overcome?

Q.20. What other realistic ways do you see of overcoming the problems of the next five years outlined in paragraphs 21-23?

24. For the five years 1980/81 — 1984/85, the position is far more serious. If student numbers fall as projected and the balance between the university and the public sector is maintained, the size of the university sector will drop by 15-20%. At most, half of the necessary reduction in staff can be obtained from normal retirements; and the Secretary of State has made it clear that the government is not prepared to find extra money to pay for premature retirements after the end of the current academic year.

Q.21. Would you favour reducing the retiring age to 40, with the possibility of extending some academic staff beyond who have not reached retirement age? (It is accepted that this would require legislation).

25. One of the main reasons why contraction presents far greater difficulties for universities than for most other enterprises is the existence of tenures, so that appointments cannot be terminated before normal retirement age other than for 'good cause'. In some universities this provision is strong, in others weaker, and in yet others the combined effect of statutes and conditions of appointment is so obscure that it could only be determined in the courts.

Q.22. Would you support the extension of tenure as a guarantee of permanent employment in the future?

26. The Leverhulme proposals

The Leverhulme proposals

26. The most recent programme of study of higher education is the series of conferences and reports organised by the Society for Research into Higher Education and financed by the Leverhulme Trust. Some of the proposals in the final volume 'Excellence in Diversity' have already been covered in this letter, but there are two important ones which have not. These are:

(a) the reduction of specialisation both in the sixth form and in the earlier parts of higher education; and

(b) the reorganisation of higher education into a sequence of modules.

27. Neither of these changes could come about quickly, if only because of the preparatory work that would be involved. Thus if they are to be set in a parallel context of other changes, constant could the declining number of younger-olds between 1985/86 and 1989/90, or the constant or lower numbers in the following five years.

28. One of the major acknowledged disadvantages of the present degree of specialisation in the sixth form is that decisions taken by school-children at the age of 15 or 16 often restrict their choice of degree courses two of three years later. The amount of specialisation in the sixth form is, of course, greatly influenced by the demands of universities. There is a considerable body of opinion among school heads in favour of a broader sixth form curriculum, but they say that they cannot themselves implement such a policy because it would put their pupils at a disadvantage in the competition for university places.

Q.24. Would you favour the universal replacement of the present system of A levels by a broader sixth form education and, if so, on what pattern? What would this imply for the quality and skills of your graduates?

Q.25. Alternatively, would you favour making a broader sixth form education the norm, and if so, would you be willing to see your own institution participate in such a reform? What effect would you expect that students with a broader sixth form education were not at a disadvantage in applying for admission to your institution?

29. An initial two-year non-vocational module within higher education already exists, in the form of the Diploma of Higher Education; but it has not gained much support because it is generally seen as inferior to a three-year degree. (The two-year course at Buckingham is not wholly relevant, because the academic year there is substantially longer). Moreover there would be serious problems in transfers between a university based on two-year modules and a university with the present structure of courses, whereas now students have no problems in taking a first degree in one university and then going on to postgraduate work in another. So if a change to a sequence of two-year modules is to happen at all, it needs to happen synchronously in all universities as possible.

Q.26. Would you favour such a change?

30. There have also been suggestions (though not in the Leverhulme report) that the structure of university courses in England and Wales should be modified somewhat along the lines of the present structure in Scotland, where there is a choice between a general and an honours degree. In such a scheme there would be choice between a two-year general degree and a three-year honours degree; whether the choice would be made at entry or after one year at university is an open question.

Q.27. Would you favour such a change, or indeed, any other change in degree format (including a longer academic year)?

The role of the UGC

31. The role of the UGC has changed very considerably since it was set up in 1919, and it may change further in the next few years.

Q.28. Have you any comments on the nature and role of the UGC and the way in which it should carry out that role?

32. There have been suggestions that a single body should be set up to take over the functions of all the bodies which now play a part in the higher education system, for example, NAB and the Wales Advisory Body, either replacing them or standing between them and Government.

Q.29. Do you favour such a proposal, and if so in what form?

More generally, do you see centralised co-ordination of both sectors as either desirable or feasible?

Yours sincerely

PETER SWINNERTON-DYTE
Summary of Annexes

The Annexes A to D are not reproduced here. A copy of each has been placed for consultation in each School Office, the Education Area Office, and the Documents Section of the Library. Any other important background papers will be similarly distributed. The Annexes are:

A. Letter from Chairman of the UGC to Secretary of State for Education & Science, 26 July 1983, and the latter's reply, 1 September. These letters define the issues on which the Secretary of State seeks the UGC's advice and on which the UGC is in turn seeking the views of the universities.

B. Consultative document issued by the National Advisory Body for Local Authority Higher Education during the summer, entitled 'Towards a Strategy for Local Authority Higher Education in the late 1980s and beyond'. It addresses 19 questions about LAHE, both to the institutions within it and to other interested parties, in the knowledge that many of the questions apply to the whole system of higher education in the UK. The questions are:

(A) Should the existing length and structure of the academic year be changed? And if so, how?

(B) Assuming no other change in existing patterns, should the average size of classes be increased? And if so, by how much?

(C) Similarly, should students be taught for fewer hours? And if so, with what balancing provision in libraries, study space etc?

(D) More generally, should greater use be made of distance learning techniques, and of computer assisted learning and allied methods? And if so, to what effect?

(E) Is there a general case for altering the balance between teaching and support staff? And if so, to what effect?

(F) Does the balance (of student support) between initial and post initial entrants, and between full-time and part-time students require modification? And if so, how, e.g. by modifications of the student support arrangements?

(G) Is the present (home student) fee structure acceptable? And if not, what modifications are desirable?

(H) More specifically, should the present (unrestricted) provision for students to live and study away from home be continued without modification? And if not, bearing in mind the large capital investment in student residential facilities, what changes are practicable?

(I) Are there other related issues (such as FEL) which NAB should address with a high degree of priority?

(J) Is an effective (national) credit transfer system needed? And if so, how might it most effectively be developed?

(K) Are the possibilities of progression between levels of higher education, particularly between sub-degree level courses, largely defined? And if not, what action is required?

(L) More particularly, is the commitment of time (i.e. duration) on initial entry to full time higher education an obstacle to non traditional entrants?

(M) Should the present balance between degree (3 and 4 year courses) and diploma (mostly 2 year courses) courses be varied? And if so, to what extent?

(N) Within any such view, what should be the balance between general courses, and more specifically vocational ones?

(O) Do respondents have any observations to make on the practices of professional and qualifying bodies?

(P) Should the ordinary degree be more widely used (as in Scotland)?

(Q) Should existing (mainly honours) degree courses be shortened in length by using, for example, a four-term year?

(R) Should some institutions offer ordinary degrees in two (calendar) years?

(S) Are there other points relating to the issues raised in this paper which respondents wish to make?

Comments should be submitted by 31 December 1983 to the Secretary. NAB, Metropolis House, 39-45 Tottenham Court Road, London, W1P 9BD.

C. Figures extracted from the DES Report on education 98 (April 1983) on 'Future demand for higher education in Great Britain'. DES has produced 'high' and 'low' projections. Key figures are:

(1) demand projections of home initial entrants to full-time and sandwich higher education;

(2) total full-time and sandwich student numbers, i.e. in (1) for all years of course plus mature entrants plus overseas students.

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D. 'Age and subject distribution of academic staff in GB universities'. From the actual numbers in 1980/81, universities' projections for 1984/85, past outflow and intake age data, and the assumption that total staffing will remain constant at the 1984/85 level until 1999/2000, are projected the age distributions at five-year intervals, and the number of staff recruited each year. The last include, e.g. appointments at senior level from outside universities, as well as junior recruits. On this basis, the average intakes, as a percentage of all staff, would be 1.4% in 1984-85, 2.2% in 1989-94, and 3.0% in 1994-99.