UNIVERSITY DISCUSSION

Notes of the University Discussion on the green paper "Planning for 1990: Discussion Paper", held on Wednesday, 28th January 1987 in the Molecular Sciences Lecture Theatre

Attendance

1. After the Vice-Chancellor had opened the meeting, which was attended by over three hundred members of the University, the Chair was taken by Mr T Framrose. Speakers pointed out that the lecture theatre was not large enough to accommodate the considerable numbers of additional people wishing to attend and it was proposed that the meeting should be transferred forthwith to Mandela Hall. It was suggested that the last University Discussion held in the latter location had proved to be unsatisfactory and divisive. It was also stated that many campus workers were present who were anxious to participate in the discussion of the University's future and it was pointed out that a further meeting could be convened if necessary at a later date.

Introduction

2. It was reported that the Planning Committee was currently engaged on the formulation of a University Plan (or white paper) drawing on the many comments and observations which had been made last term on the green paper dated October 1986. Any arising from the present meeting would be taken into account as well and a report would also be made to the Senate, which had recommended at its last meeting that such a University Discussion should be held.

3. In response to questions as to why such a Plan need be drawn up at all in the absence of a specific request for it from the University Grants Committee, and whether other universities had embarked upon such an exercise, it was stated that this was not a panic measure but an attempt to confront important policy issues now which could prove of great value as details of the University's funding to the end of the present decade became available; almost all other universities were known to be engaged in such planning for their future.

4. It was suggested that the green paper's assumptions, based on expected UGC cuts in grant, would be falsified if level funding were to prove feasible, as had originally been promised by Government. In reply, it was stated that, even if the latter could be guaranteed, it would still be necessary to draft similar proposals to those in the green paper, because the University's costs were rising and the economies which had been adopted in the past were inadequate. It was also stressed that the green paper was a discussion document, intended to set out the main planning issues: although the broad sub-division of resources between academic and non-academic headings had been decided by the Senate and Council, virtually all the remaining details still remained to be determined.

5. With regard to the financial background, it was explained that an announcement from the UGC was expected in February about the grant for the remaining three years of the decade, representing the culmination of a planning process which began last year with a request from the UGC for information about the University's research strengths and for projections based on an assumed annual reduction in funding of 2% over the next three years. In the event, the UGC had recognised the University's excellence in research and the comparatively low level of grant for the mix of subjects represented at Sussex. As a result, the green paper postulated a reduction of 4% (instead of 6%), with academic expenditure reduced to 92.5 from a baseline of 100 (instead of to 88, as it had previously
been agreed that any extra income received should be devoted to academic purposes).

6. More recently, the Government had in December announced extra money for universities and the expected levels of inflation affecting the grant had been recalculated; both factors taken together should benefit Sussex by about £150,000 by 1989-90. In addition, a further £350,000 could be estimated as likely to accrue in that year on the basis of the latest information about the application of the UGC’s formula to the University’s research grant income and from the probable effect of the UGC’s abolition of its “safety net” for the less favoured institutions, which had been paid for by a temporary levy on those (such as Sussex) receiving higher levels of funding. If this additional total of some £500,000 were applied to academic budget headings, this would give a reduction to 95.5 (instead of to the 88 referred to in paras 5 and 6 above) and there would be a total reduction in University income of some £2 over four years.

7. The ensuing discussion included the following points, set out in the order in which they were made.

- The improvements in funding projected in paras 5 and 6 above should mean that the total of 382 academic faculty posts estimated in the green paper could be revised to between 390 and 400. If necessary, the formula to academic faculty numbers, were subject to the reductions proposed in the green paper, their morale would suffer severely and the University’s capacity to graduate well-qualified students would be seriously impaired, a situation about which the Science Committee and Science Deans had already expressed their concern. It was not clear why the Computing Centre had been so favourably treated in the green paper, nor why its funding could not have been drawn from the Development Fund. In reply, it was explained that the latter was intended as short-term “seed corn” and that the Planning Committee, after careful study, had concluded that a higher level of long-term funding was essential for this important unit.

- The University’s general academic shape had been largely determined over twenty years ago, but changes and adjustments were unavoidable, for example in the face of changing patterns of applicant demand. This had led to the creation of a new Major in computing which was already attracting 320 applicants — a figure comparable to that for a long-established subject such as physics, which might be as much as an extra £150,000 available to the University if its bids for earmarked UGC funds on major repairs and library acquisitions were successful. The successful and that figure could be increased still further if future inflation rates were less than had been forecast. On the other hand, earmarked income could not be diverted to other more general purposes, inflation estimates might turn out to be less than the true annual figures, and, even on the most optimistic assumptions, the University was most unlikely to receive anything better than level funding.

- The wisdom was queried of creating new Majors when existing places were not all being taken up and the high priority attached to the attraction of good applicants was emphasised. Failure to do so would mean that the assumptions in the green paper, not only about faculty numbers but about many other aspects as well, would have to be revised. In response to a question, it was stressed that the University did not expect the annual salary and wage settlements of its staff, many of whom were very poorly remunerated and described below prevailing rates of inflation so as to fund future developments, though the link between the numbers of staff that could be afforded and the money they were paid, was also pointed out.

- Senate had accepted the green paper at its last meeting, but a University Discussion was only now taking place and hitherto the views of students and workers had not been properly taken into account; instead of participating in the present attempt to defuse anger and hostility, people should recognise that they would have to fight the same cuts and should discuss how best to do so. But the green paper had only been accepted by the Senate as a basis for further discussion; in addition, the Planning Officer had compiled the specific comments from Subject Groups and Schools of Studies on points of detail, to ensure that these were not overlooked in the preparation of the University Plan.

11. What was seen as the secretive nature of the decision-making process was deplored, with individuals and Subject Groups lacking any direct involvement in the work of the Planning Committee or access to its minutes and other papers. It was suggested, however, that Sussex procedures were as democratic as those in other universities and that confidentiality was essential to the proper functioning of the Planning Committee because so much of its business concerned the preliminary stages of issues or projects; moreover, its recommendations had to be passed to plenary bodies whose papers were widely circulated within the University for information. While it was desirable that an institution should trust those responsible for managing its affairs, it was also felt that such trust ought to be a two-way process. As to the true location of real power within the University, a case could be made for identifying officers-holders such as Pro-Vice-Chancellors, Deans or Subject Chairpersons as exercising particular influence; it must, however, be recognised that final decisions were taken by the Senate and the Council (the former composed largely of elected academic members and not by the administrative secretariat).

12. Questions were raised about how the reduced funding for particular subjects (such as physics) could be reconciled with the interests of the nation and about the mechanism whereby posts would be shed. In reply, it was acknowledged that the national interest seemed scarcely relevant to recent decisions about the funding of universities, though if the medium- and longer-term financial prospects were to continue improving as indicated in paras 5 and 6 above, there was hope that enforced redundancies could be avoided. On the other hand, it was argued that after ten years of reductions in Government grant, the economy of the country was still uncertain and that the present meeting represented an attempt to lull members into accepting something that they really should repudiate. The plight of other institutions of higher education less fortunate than Sussex was described and members urged not to be merely inward-looking in their concerns. It was also pointed out that members of the clerical and technical staff did not attend School or Subject Group meetings.

13. The efforts of the Committee of Vice-Chancellors & Principals were described in negotiations with Government, the Department of Education & Science and the UGC to try and minimise the harmful effects of reduced funding or to press for improvements. These had included the production of an alternative plan for the future of higher education and a well publicised meeting in London to discuss it, attended by members of both Houses of Parliament; reference was also made to the efforts of trade unions, learned societies and the UGC itself. The green paper’s Preface was criticised as too fatalistic, in view of the efforts which were being made, and still could be, made to change the Government’s mind. In addition, it was reported that whereas on the basis of latest estimates of income (paras 5 and 6 above) academic funding would be reduced by 4.5% if the budgetary arrangement were applied, administrative funding would suffer a 5.5% reduction.

14. The public response of the University was contrasted with that of Brighton Borough Council, which had clearly announced that there would be no job losses of
cunts in services and the meeting's attention was drawn to a petition originating in the School of Mathematical & Physical Sciences and calling for the Government to make adequate resources available for education and research (see para 17(1) below). However, the ability of local government to levy rates was contrasted with the obligations upon a university under its Charter and Statutes to operate with a balanced budget; although its buildings could be mortgaged to raise loans, a sum of £1 million raised by this method now would require the repayment of more than £1.3 million over the next ten years. Whereas some institutions were said to have adopted a policy of non-implementation in the face of the latest financial reductions, it was suggested that the risks of eventual insolvency would surely be causing serious uncertainty for their staff and students. The role of an educational establishment was contrasted with that of a factory and it was argued that job losses and salary erosion would eventually mean an inability to teach students properly. All universities were competing for shares of a diminishing total sum, instead of developing a co-ordinated national campaign in which the implementation of cuts would be rejected and if necessary, the condition of campus buildings allowed to deteriorate or left for the Government to repair. With regard to the Graduate School in Arts & Social Studies, whose retention could be represented as more important than the expansion of computing, it was explained that the School was an organisational unit and that no jobs would be lost if it were abolished.

15. The Senate's role in respect of the green paper and the nature of its debates were commented upon: its status regarding financial matters was ambiguous and appeared to be confined to consultation and advice while decisions were reached by the Council on the recommendation of the Planning Committee. For example, the abolition of the Graduate School had been deplored at Subject Group and School meetings in the Arts & Social Studies Area, along with the new Budgetary Centres and the proposed broad division of funding in the green paper, but the Senate was effectively being faced with a fait accompli and there was no mechanism for members of the University to respond creatively to the problems facing it. Speakers called for greater co-operation and solidarity, with reciprocal trust between the Vice-Chancellor and other members of the institution. Such a spirit could be fostered by holding more discussions of the present type and by making the record of their proceedings widely available. In response to the criticism that the Report of the national Jarratt Committee, on which a member of the University had served, was responsible for reductions in funding, it was explained that the Report had contained no funding recommendations at all, though its proposals were relevant to the ways in which policies were formulated for dealing with such reductions.

16. It was suggested that the provision for building repairs and maintenance need not be as great as recommended in the green paper, or might be spread over a longer period to free money for other purposes. But the physical plant was complex and in many cases more than twenty years old; its proper stewardship called for balanced judgements about the risks of a major failure to roofs, concrete structures or heating mains which could result in a whole building having to be taken out of use, with catastrophic results for teaching and research. The longer remedial work was deferred the greater such risks would become. It was important to recognise that the best guarantee of adequate financial provision was to convince members of the public at large, in their capacity as individual electors, that universities ought to be highly valued and treated as vital to the country's future. It was also stated that Sussex had since the occupation of Sussex House begun, lost money which could have paid for several posts, including the tuition fees from potential students who would not now come here and at least one external research grant.

Conclusion

17. After more than two hours of discussion, it was agreed to recommend as follows, the first two motions being carried without a vote and the other two by an overwhelming majority:

(1) The University should support the NAPS petition, viz: We the undersigned, students members of faculty and employees of British universities, wish to draw the attention of the British Parliament and people to the grave financial crisis which our universities are facing and which threatens the future well-being of our nation. We call upon Her Majesty's Government to make adequate resources available so that the educational and research obligations of our institutions might be properly fulfilled.

(2) The notes of the discussion should be published, preferably as a "Bulletin Special".

(3) This Administration notes the lack of confidence expressed by this meeting in the Administration's response to the budgetary cuts imposed by the UGC.

(4) This meeting calls for the appointment of a small group composed of trade unionists, students, academic and administrative faculty, to be provided with facilities by the Secretariat, to devise counter proposals to those contained in the green paper.