It is well known that universities in this country face serious and growing financial difficulties. The issue currently commands considerable national attention. Thus an editorial in The Financial Times (no less!) on 25 January 1989 concluded as follows:

"The Government is right to encourage universities to seek alternative sources of finance. But such efforts are still in their infancy. For the foreseeable future, the universities will remain overwhelmingly dependent on public money. Mr. Baker thus has a duty to match his rhetoric about future expansion with the resources needed for a realistic pay award for lecturers. The universities will otherwise remain in relative decline."

A further editorial in the same paper on 6 February 1989, on the wider question of 'The future of learning', ended with these words:

"British higher education does need reviving. After a decade of austerity, university teachers are an ageing, poorly paid, fractious and frequently demoralised profession. And Britain continues to educate far too small a proportion of the workforce to degree level. But market forces and private money alone are unlikely to bring about the desired transformation."

I addressed, in the Bulletin on 15 November 1988, the question of top-up loans for students. I now wish to ventilate the issue of academic salaries.

The facts on salaries

The salary scale for University Lecturers today ranges from a minimum of £9,260 per annum (£11,680 at age 27) to a maximum of £19,310 per annum. The Senior Lecturer scale is £20,270 to £22,910. Professors begin at not less than £23,380.

It is true that universities were assisted by the Government to provide salary increases for academic staff of 16 per cent from 1 December 1986 and seven per cent from 1 March 1988. The effect of that 25 per cent pay increase was temporarily to halt the relative decline in such salaries. But it did not reverse the trend, which is indeed now resuming its downward movement.

To illustrate this:

- The Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (CVCP) has demonstrated (and the Treasury do not deny) that academic salaries have declined by more than 20 per cent relative to the Average Earnings Index since 1979.
- Earnings generally in the UK are now rising at nine per cent per annum; the Retail Price Index is heading towards a seven per cent rate of annual increase.
- Universities are facing increasing problems in recruiting and retaining top quality staff both generally and (to an acute degree) in certain academic disciplines which are in particularly high
market demand. A survey of academic staff posts in the UK in 1988 showed that 36 per cent of vacant professorial posts and 19 per cent of lecturerships remained unfilled.

Comparison with the Civil Service
The grades of Principal and Senior Principal in the Civil Service have traditionally been considered comparable to those of Lecturer and Senior Lecturer. Civil Service salaries are depressed also; but they are still noticeably better than university salaries. The scale for a Principal is £17,360 to £23,624; Civil Servants retire earlier (at or before 60 rather than at or before 65) but enjoy non-contributory pension schemes. A 'high flyer' in the Civil Service will make the Principal grade in his or her late 20s, will move up to Assistant Secretary (£28,170 to £31,602) well before becoming 40, and end up as Under Secretary or higher.

Action by the Vice-Chancellors
Universities cannot fund a significant further salary increase without fresh funds from Government. Individual universities have different capacities to pay: some are in such difficulties that, strictly, they can afford nothing at all. (At Sussex, this year's estimated deficit of £1/2 million, coming on top of previous deficits, is expected to exhaust the University's non-earmarked reserves; our local capacity is therefore not great — although we are better off than many sister institutions.)

Nevertheless, the CVCP last month offered a nationwide increase of three per cent for academic staff with effect from 1 April 1989, plus a small lump sum.

At the same time, the CVCP formally asked the Secretary of State for Education and Science on 27 January for an extra £64 million in 1989-90 and an extra £119 million in 1990-91, to permit further pay increases (additional to the three per cent just mentioned).

The CVCP have also asked for new funds to be made available to Research Councils, to increase the salaries of researchers employed to undertake the work for which grants are awarded.

Conclusion
In my view, the average salaries of academic staff are now too low. They may well fall yet lower. This can only do serious harm, to individuals and to their institutions, to students and to society at large.

The salary of a Lecturer Grade A (£9,260 to £14,500), for example, gives very poor recognition to the dedication and distinction of someone who has gained entrance to this intellectually exacting profession by the acquisition of a high honours degree, and by the diligent completion of testing postgraduate and frequently also postdoctoral work. The necessarily lengthy preparation and training which a University Lecturer has to undergo will have meant the deferment of earnings until the individual's late 20s or even later. In many cases, such individuals would have had no difficulty in earning much more outside a university career, or by choosing a university career in the States or elsewhere abroad.

Of course, the motivation of university faculty is teaching and research, not monetary reward. But they are entitled to a decent recompense for the services they offer society. At present, they are not getting it. If academic rewards become too minimal, not only will a grave injustice have been done, but also an increasing number of bright people either will not enter the profession or will not remain in it in this country. Our university system could not survive that without a serious decline in its hitherto high academic standards.

Further action by us
Academics do not usually wave banners or take part in noisy demonstrations. Nor are they likely to be enthusiastic about taking action to prevent examinations and thereby damage the interests of their own students. That, above all, cannot be the answer. But academics need sympathy and support in seeking to convince Government and the general public that there is a serious and deserving case to answer.

Those on campus who agree that such a case exists have the option (and students' parents have the option) of writing to MPs, leading industrialists and others with influence in these matters, to bring the point home. I myself am already doing so, in support of the Vice-Chancellors' efforts at national level.

This is not a party political matter. We are talking about the national interest, which requires a first class higher educational system for our future prosperity in a competitive world environment. The universities should seek to enlist friends and sympathisers across a broad spectrum, on the basis of cool arguments and cold facts.

Leslie Fielding