

## HIGHER EDUCATION

'We now have something of a policy vacuum at national level. . . the Government has seen it as its duty, fully confirmed by its electoral mandate, to deal first with public expenditure.' It was in these words that a senior official at the Department of Education and Science described the lack of government policy towards higher education, at an educational conference last December.

The supposed necessity of reducing public expenditure has been the major determinant of the Conservative government's attitude towards higher education since it took office. A number of social and educational questions which have long taxed the minds of civil servants within the DES are being answered, at least temporarily, through the crude demands of cutting public spending. In the process, many aspects of the higher education system which was built up after and around the Robbins' report of 1963 are being significantly changed.

The new expenditure-led policies are having most effect as the result of decisions in three major areas: overseas students, future access to higher education, and the financing of the non-university sector.

The decision to charge overseas students from outside the EEC so-called 'full economic cost' tuition fees (fees for next year's entrants are to range from £2,000pa for arts courses to £5,000pa for medical courses) was taken as a supposedly easy and uncontentious way to cut public expenditure, and at the same time to 'solve' the continuing problem of providing for the unplanned and still rising growth in the number of overseas entrants. This move at one stroke made UK higher education almost the most expensive in the world, and is bound to mean that many hard hit will be students from those developing countries which have not yet been able to establish indigenous systems of higher education, often as the result of colonial domination by Britain.

To what extent, and in what areas, there will be a fall in the number of overseas students will not become clear until provisional figures are published in the autumn. But it is already widely recognised that the viability of many courses with a large complement of overseas students is endangered by the new fees policy. Courses in engineering and technology, to which government and industry are otherwise so committed, are especially vulnerable (20% of university undergraduates, 30% of advanced further education students and more than 50% of university postgraduates in these subject areas are from overseas). The educational prospects of would-be home



students are thus being restricted by the same policy that is hitting their overseas counterparts.

But it is not just the overseas students fees' policy that will limit the opportunities of home students. The access of all qualified people to higher education has been guaranteed over the last two decades by the so-called Robbins principle, which stated that courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so. It has long been anticipated that the provision of higher education would therefore continue to expand in order to meet student demand, which is expected to peak in the late 1980s. But public expenditure constraints have led to the replacement of the Robbins principle by the policy of 'level funding'. This means, quite simply, that the resources available for home students in higher education each year will remain (in theory) at about the same level as this year (1979/80). Therefore the total home student population should remain roughly constant, rather than expanding to meet demand.

One of the most immediate consequences of the level funding policy will be the curtailment of opportunities, not only among traditional school leaver entrants, but also among those other groups — such as mature and working class entrants, women, the ethnic minorities — which some institutions have just started to attract adequately into higher education.

The new policy also raises questions about the management of resources in higher education. A system which has been used to change mainly through continued expansion is being told that expansion is to cease but that change will still be demanded of it.

Rhodes Boyson, the Minister responsible for higher education, likes to portray the new situation as a challenge: 'once we accept that we must provide for research, development and innovation from our existing resources', he had said 'we can define the problems to be solved and generate the creative debate on priorities essential to progress'. It is in this atmosphere that talk of giving a 'broad steer' to subject balance is being mooted, and it is against such a background that reaction is being expressed to plans for the rationalisation of parts of higher education (such as the University Grants Committee's report on Russian and Russian Studies in Universities, and the Flowers report on the organisation of medical education in the University of London).

The question of management of resources is also at the heart of the debate about the control and funding of the maintained (non-university) sector of higher education. The cost of nearly all maintained higher education institutions (ie polytechnics, colleges and institutes of higher education) is borne collectively by all local education authorities through a pooling system. Up until the financial year 1980/81, the size of the 'pool' of funds was determined retrospectively, and the system thus became characterised as open-ended and lacking in accountability. Rejecting Labour's proposals for a National Body to administer the pool, the Tories decided on the crudest possible solution to the problem and fixed a cash limit on the 1980/81 pool in advance. This move has come to be known as the 'capping of the pool'.

The overall reduction in the size of the pool introduced through its 'capping' means that most colleges will have to make some cuts. But the arbitrary mechanisms which have

been used to determine the size of the contribution each institution is to receive from the pool has meant that some will suffer substantially more than others. Many colleges have been thrown back onto the good offices of their own LEAs, and have not always been generously received - - the refusal by the three (Labour) maintaining authorities to make up the shortfall in the North East London Polytechnic's budget for next year has led to plans for the closure of two faculties, 62 lecturer redundancies, and the winding up of a number of specialist projects (including the Centre for Alternative Industrial and Technological Systems, which was established to develop the ideas contained in the Lucas Aerospace workers' Corporate Plan). And if the 'capping' exercise is repeated next year, it will have the effect of freezing and exaggerating already present inequalities.

The effects of policies generated by short-term expenditure considerations are already becoming clear. Access to higher education for students both from home and overseas is being restricted. Real cuts in expenditure, coupled with uncertainty about future income from overseas students' fees and the cost of pay and price rises, will lead to the first contractions in the system and the likelihood of a number of colleges actually having to close in the next few years. The 'capping of the pool', through inflicting a cut on the maintained sector far greater than that suffered by the universities, will accentuate the already divisive split between the two sectors of higher education.

At the same time, problems of planning and control have been made even more acute: how is the 'broad steer' to be introduced? What system should be used to equitably administer the pool? What should be the relationship between the universities and the maintained sector? There has been a remarkable degree of unity among educational interest groups - - including University Vice-Chancellors, college Principals, lecturers, non-teaching staffs, and students -- in opposing government policies, most notably on overseas students. However, as their various submissions to the House of Commons new Select Committee on Education, Science and the Arts have made clear, they are as far away as ever from a consensus as to what direction higher education should move in. The DES itself is somewhat battered by the opposition to the policies it has been forcing through and therefore unlikely to take any new initiatives. It is quite possible that higher education under the Tories will continue to be directed by nothing more imaginative than Treasury dictates.