

## Graduate education

### Too many laggards

The Science Research Council, the chief source of public support for British graduate students, is alarmed at the lengthening time taken to complete PhD courses. A preliminary survey of 25 higher education institutions has shown that on average only 60 per cent of those holding SRC studentships complete their PhDs within four years. According to Sir Geoffrey Allen, chairman of the council, a figure of 80 per cent would be respectable, but 90 per cent would be the ideal.

The issue has come to the surface after an investigation by a working party of the Advisory Board for the Research Councils, which has been looking into the broader question of postgraduate education and manpower needs. That in turn was stimulated by the revelation of Sir Michael Posner, chairman of the Social Science Research Council, to the Public Accounts Committee of the House of Commons last summer that fewer than 30 per cent of his council's graduate students complete their PhDs within four years.

Given pause by that statistic, the Science Research Council made a rapid survey of five institutions where it supports students and arrived at the figure of 60 per cent, which a subsequent survey of 25 institutions has upheld. The advisory board's working party, which is also concerned with the performance of postgraduates supported by the Social Science, Medical and Agricultural Research Councils, has commissioned a more detailed study intended to throw some light on why so many students take so long to complete their theses, or even fail to complete them at all.

Particular attention is likely to be paid to the performance of the Science Research Council's students, if only because there are more of them than of the other councils — on the average, 2,350 new science studentships are awarded each year. Most of these are in the gift of university departments, to which studentships are allocated on a quota basis. Studentships are worth about £3,500 a year, and are tenable for three years, the estimated time for completing a research project.

The reasons for these delays are still obscure. The Science Research Council expects to find marked differences of performance in different institutions and subject areas. PhDs in pure science may more often be completed than those in applied science — applied scientists and engineers are more likely to find jobs in industry, where writing a thesis may seem irrelevant and where there is little time for writing up anyway. It is also suspected that institutions and departments with a large number of PhD students will have a better track record than those with relatively few.

The issue also, however, raises questions concerning the meaning and purpose of a

PhD, which the advisory board's working party is looking into under its broader remit. Should a PhD for example, be a thorough and lengthy investigation of a detailed scientific problem, or more simply a means of training a student in the techniques of research? The approach is bound to have implications for the completion time.

As yet, no reliable pecking order of institutions has been established, but the early surveys do suggest that the Universities of Birmingham, Cambridge, East Anglia and Bristol, and King's College in the University of London, have the best completion records and that the Universities of Newcastle upon Tyne, Sussex and Bradford, together with Imperial College, London, and most of the polytechnics, have the worst.

The poor track record of Imperial College, regarded as a highly prestigious scientific and technological institution, may seem surprising. Lord Flowers, rector of the college, says that the explanation may be that large numbers of its postgraduates rapidly find employment in industry, leaving them little time for writing up.

The advisory board's working party has yet to decide what should be done. Sanctions against departments with poor track records have been mentioned. Cutting quotas of studentships is an obvious device. Sir Geoffrey Allen, however, hopes to avoid such heavy-handed treatment. Most academics, he says, are willing to accept genuine criticism and put their houses in order. The peer review system should take care of that.

Judy Redfearn

## British universities

### More confusion

Confusion among British universities about their financial prospects appears to have been further deepened by the letter from the chairman of the University Grants Committee, Dr E. S. Parkes, circulated to vice-chancellors on 30 December. The letter contained a warning that the resources available for the 1981-82 academic year may be reduced by between 5½ and 6 per cent compared with the amounts advertised in the Public Expenditure estimates a year ago. The committee's latest estimate of the shortfall next year is an amalgam of a 3½ per cent cut estimated to be the universities' share of the £30 million cut for higher education announced last November and the still incalculable effect on university finances of the partial disappearance of overseas students, some of whom have been frightened away by "economic" fees.

Some universities regard Dr Parkes's warning as a signal for drastic belt-tightening. Last week, for example, Lord Annan, Vice-Chancellor of the University of London, told the university senate that

the total budget of £200 million might be reduced by between £15 and £20 million in 1982. Other universities appear to be taking a more phlegmatic line, believing that they cannot know the worst until the individual allocations of funds for 1981-82 are made in April or soon thereafter.

Between now and then, the committee itself will have several difficult questions to decide. One possibility raised in the letter from Dr Parkes is that the committee may keep back until later in the academic year a proportion of the funds made available by the Department of Education and Science, using the reserve to make good deficiencies that have by then appeared. There are precedents for such a reserve, but no decision has yet been made, nor have criteria for deciding how to use the money been defined.

The Parkes letter also promises explicit guidance in the spring on the numbers of home students at which British universities should aim in the coming academic year, and on their desired distribution among different kinds of courses. Although such "guidance" has accompanied previous financial allocations to British universities, some universities now apparently fear that the committee intends to be more "dirigiste" than in the past — while others remark that Dr Parkes's letter is a good deal less so than his speech to a closed meeting of the Committee of Vice-Chancellors at the beginning of December. It does however seem clear that the University Grants Committee will take steps to ensure that universities do not earn their way out of trouble by recruiting more home students than at present for the sake of the extra fee income that would bring.

Planning for the year ahead has been further confused by reports that Mr Mark Carlisle, Secretary of State for Education and Science, told a conference in the north of England on 6 January that he saw no reason why the cuts now proposed should be matched by "a reduced provision". Universities, on the other hand, say that there will have to be a reduction of student entry this October if they are to live within their straitened budgets.

The future constitution of the University Grants Committee itself also appears to be in question. Taking its cue from a recommendation of the House of Commons Select Committee on Education towards the end of last year that the committee should cultivate more independence, the department has raised the possibility that the committee's staff (at present seconded from the Civil Service) should become direct employees. Some of those concerned wryly reflect that this is not quite the independence that the House of Commons committee had in mind, but they acknowledge that such a step would reduce the size of the Civil Service and transfer part of its cost away from central government. The fine print in the proposal, which is said to be "very small", is being read carefully.