

Belgian universities hit trouble

Money problem complicated by language split

Brussels

The beginning to the new academic year has been depressing for Belgian academics. Almost all of Belgium's oldest and most renowned universities are having to make sweeping staff cutbacks and to reduce the amount of research work possible for the next seven years. Under the special powers awarded to the present centre-right coalition government at the beginning of the year, the government has been free to take any measures it sees fit to stem Belgium's rising public spending deficit. The universities, at least those running large deficits, were given an ultimatum either to put their own financial houses in order, or to have the government intervening directly.

Anxious to preserve their autonomy, the university authorities have been sharpening the axe themselves and their plans are now being studied by the central government. Defiant talk of forming a united front against the government's demands, despite strikes and occupation of university buildings at the Catholic University of Louvain, has subsided into a grumbling acquiescence.

The truth is that the universities are divided and find themselves in widely differing situations. With the important exception of Ghent, only the Walloon or French-speaking universities are faced with a problem. The Flemish universities are by and large the creation of the 1960s, with a younger staff and a more streamlined and efficient administration.

The older francophone universities, which began to run into trouble towards the end of the 1970s, now have their backs against the wall. According to Hervé Hasquin, rector of the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB), his university has seen its budget dwindle by 25 per cent from as far back as 1975.

This year alone, the measures taken by Education Minister Michel Tromont have slashed ULB's budget by BF 300 million (\$6 million) and in the country as a whole savings of around BF 2,000 million (\$40 million) will probably have been achieved by the end of the year.

The government has reduced the payments per student, by which the universities finance themselves, by 2.5 per cent and has abolished grants for students on postgraduate courses. As in the United Kingdom, foreign students have also been a victim of the cuts and are now required to pay full tuition fees — up to \$5,000 a year

— unless they come from one of the 44 earmarked developing countries.

Against this background, it is surprising that the peculiarly Belgian system of "dedoublement", of maintaining separate university systems for each language, has survived intact. There is thus a Dutch-language university in Brussels (FUB) and a French one, each offering roughly the same courses. Similarly there is the old Catholic University of Louvain and the Flemish KUL at a modern campus at Louvain La Neuve. With a few exceptions on the humanities side, no courses are held jointly and teaching posts are awarded on a strictly linguistic basis. A Walloon physics professor would be unlikely to obtain a vacant post at a Flemish university.

The problem is further complicated by the religious requirements until recently in force in some Belgian universities. Filling a chair in, say, astrophysics, with a Dutch-speaking Catholic who happens also to be a reasonably distinguished astrophysicist is not always easy. The feasibility of reorganization within the university system is further complicated by the emergence of separate language-based regional governments, likely to resist moves threatening their "own" universities.

The result is that in post baby-boom Belgium, there are now some 15 universities for a population of 9.9 million. For the 4.4 million French speakers in Belgium, there are nine universities. The Catholic University of Louvain — Dutch speakers need not apply.

dedoublement, says Andre Degroeve, president of the administrative council of ULB, is definitely not a cause of the financial problems of Belgian universities, which stem from a drop in the number of students and the need to reduce public spending.

The plans put forward by the affected universities consist chiefly of cutting back on salaries and staff, and the universities have been given *carte blanche* by the government to ignore existing employment contracts. Liège, for instance, will enforce the compulsory retirement of teaching staff at the age of 65 and of other employees at 60 from September 1983. The aim will be to reduce personnel by 600, some 25 per cent of the total, and to cut running costs by 12 per cent. Research assistantships will be particularly badly hit in all the affected universities. At ULB, three out of five jobs will disappear and Degroeve predicts that in ten or fifteen years there will be a serious shortage of experienced teaching staff.

Research work will also be badly affected and Belgian universities have not so far been especially successful in winning contracts from industry. "What makes the future look all the more dismal is that nobody knows how long the coalition government and its policies will last. Before the last elections there were six coalitions in four years", said Degroeve mournfully.

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