

UK overseas students

Foreign Office steps into breach

THE drastic fall in numbers of overseas students in UK universities which followed the government's decision to charge the "economic" rate for their education now seems to be officially recognized as a worrying trend. In an attempt to improve matters the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is now finalizing plans for how it is to spend some £46 million over the next three years to encourage selected groups of overseas students to come to Britain. The first beneficiaries of the new "focused" policy will start their courses in September.

In 1980 the government decided to charge students from outside the European Community the full economic cost of their courses, and numbers fell by about 25 per cent in two years. "Full cost" fees in clinical medicine, to take the worst case, are now £6,600 per year, while home students pay only £480 per year. Overseas governments made plain their displeasure to the former Foreign Secretary, Mr Francis Pym, and his predecessor Lord

Carrington. Malaysia, which was numerically the country worst affected by the "full cost" policy, retaliated with an anti-British trading policy.

In a remarkable example of cooperation with a non-governmental organization, the Foreign Office encouraged the Overseas Students Trust (OST), an educational charity, to carry out a study on the problem. The trust's 280-page report called for selective assistance for students from British dependent territories (chiefly Hong Kong) and from Cyprus; it estimated the total cost of its proposals at £35 million, of which £15 million would be "new" money.

Responding to the trust's report in February, Mr Pym announced a £46 million package of "targeted schemes" to run for three years. Some £21 million of the total is to come from the unallocated reserve of the aid programme, and £25 million is new money from the diplomatic contingency reserve.

First-degree students from Hong Kong

will, subject to a means test, pay UK home tuition fees from September. The balance of the cost between this and the full cost will be shared equally by the UK and Hong Kong governments, the UK share being limited to £1.9 million in the coming academic year. Up to 1,700 students will benefit from the new scheme, which is now being advertised. Similar arrangements may be made with other dependencies, such as Bermuda and the Cayman Islands: the cost of these schemes would be no more than £100,000 per year.

Cyprus has a "unique combination of claims for special assistance", according to OST, having a large refugee population, no university, and strategic importance to Britain. Mr Pym accepted the trust's case, and the Cyprus government will receive £1 million for each of the next three years to subsidize students coming to the United Kingdom on first degree and equivalent courses. About 700 students will each receive £1,500 in the first year.

The Malaysian government will receive £5 million over three years, £1 million of which is for the coming academic year. This, unlike the Cyprus scheme, will be applied selectively, with the Malaysian authorities doing the selecting. Between 300 and 400 students will benefit next year. The Foreign Office is now confident that all racial groups in Malaysia will be represented among the students coming to this country.

In addition to these special schemes there is to be a new scheme of discretionary awards hopefully aimed at bringing to the United Kingdom future leaders, formers of opinion and able students from potential trading partners. A total of 160 of the new awards will be available this year, at a cost to the government of £700,000; students from all countries will be eligible. Government support for the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan is to be increased by a total of £6 million over three years, and there will be increases for the British Council and the Overseas Development Administration's technical cooperation programme.

Mr Martin Kenyon, OST's director, has welcomed the government's response but says it is only a beginning. Kenyon says the government should maintain and formalize the interdepartmental machinery it established to cope with the overseas students crisis; Foreign Office officials are "actively considering" this suggestion. Ministers are also understood to be favourably inclined to OST's suggestion that universities and other institutions should be allowed to set their own fee levels: fees for many courses would drop if institutions were allowed to charge their own marginal costs with allowances for overheads.

Consultations are taking place with local authorities and the University Grants Committee, but the groundswell of opinion seems to be opposed to such a move.

Tim Beardsley

Soviet space programme

Launch sites are revealed

THE Soviet Union has made a major policy U-turn in its handling of the space programme. For the first time in 26 years, it has permitted two of its launch sites — Kapustin Yar and Plesetsk — to be described in the Soviet press.

Until now, the dateline for all on-the-spot reportage of space launches has been "Baikonur Cosmodrome". The name appears to have been derived from a down-range townlet, although the nearest town to the main launchpad is Tyuratam. Kapustin Yar, although initially the base for the Kosmos series of satellites, has normally only been described as "a launch facility in the middle latitudes of the European part of the Soviet Union".

The Plesetsk base has been even more carefully concealed from the Soviet public. Its existence was first detected, abroad, by the British Kettering group of satellite watchers in October 1966, although the name Plesetsk was first assigned to it a few weeks later by an enterprising American journalist who looked up the coordinates (as announced by Kettering) on a map of the Soviet Union. Until now, Soviet hints of its existence have been more circumspect than in the case of Kapustin Yar — a few references to a "northern launch facility", made within the context of the joint Comcon Interkosmos programme. Here a major security factor may be that this site (south of Archangel) is suitable for launching satellites into polar orbits. When it was constructed in the late 1950s, such orbits were a major cause of international friction, as they enable satellites to scan the whole of the Earth's surface.

Nevertheless, some inkling of these sites did reach the Soviet public. Contrails from Kapustin Yar launches can frequently be seen from tourist sites on the Volga, while Plesetsk launches have been reported by the Soviet public as "flying saucers". Until now, however, such events have been officially explained as "glowing smog" or meteorites.

The decision to identify the sites at last has not led to any major revelations, although *Pravda* has described high altitude tests with the "stratonaut" dogs Al'oin and Kozak — precursors of Laika launched in Sputnik-2 — and some hints of early difficulties in recovering a live payload. The establishment of Baikonur and then Plesetsk apparently resulted in some downgrading of Kapustin Yar, but then, says *Pravda*, a new "glorious page" in its history opened on 14 October 1969, with the launch of Interkosmos-1.

In another article on Plesetsk, *Pravda* concentrates on the flying saucer stories and the difficulties of construction work in so wild a terrain, plus the fact (already well known abroad from the work of the Kettering group) that the majority of Molniya (communications) and Meteor (weather) satellites are launched from Plesetsk, as also were the first French MAS satellites.

Why the Soviets have decided to publicize these launch sites, after so long, is not entirely clear. It may be related to current Soviet attacks on alleged US plans for the "militarization" of space — which would logically demand a greater openness concerning their own space programme.

Vera Rich