

Universities unhappy about education reform proposals

London

BRITAIN'S universities have reacted with disquiet to the government's Education Reform Bill (Bill 53, HMSO, £10.50), fearing that the independence of institutions and individuals is being threatened. The clauses in the bill directly affecting higher education signal greater public accountability, increased central government influence and closer ties with industry. The bill contains no reference to funding through a system of contracts, as previously proposed, and there is no direct provision to protect academic freedom upon the abolition of tenure in the universities. The polytechnic sector has broadly welcomed the bill's provisions to allow polytechnics to manage their own affairs, without the imposition of local authority bureaucracy, and the narrowing of the gulf between state support of the universities and polytechnics.

The main provisions of the bill differ little from the White Paper (policy document) published last April (see *Nature* 326, 529; 1987). Polytechnics and certain of the larger colleges of further education will be taken from the control of local authorities to become statutory corporations. Finance will come direct from central government, distributed through a new Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council (PCFC). The bill sets out in some detail the required constitution of the newly formed corporations' board of governors. It is likely that once independent of the local authority, an individual institution will be able to become a company limited by guarantee.

The mechanism for distributing public funds between universities will also change. The University Grants Committee (UGC) will be replaced by a Universities Funding Council (UFC) comprising 15 members, at least six of whom will have an industrial or commercial background (of the present 17 members of the UGC, two are from industry). The UFC and PCFC will have almost identical remits. The UFC, unlike the UGC, will not give to the Secretary of State advice by right on the financial needs of the universities, something about which the Committee of Vice-chancellors and Principals (CVCP) is "very concerned" and will be seeking to amend. The Association of University Teachers (AUT) has been taken aback by the stark wording of the clauses enabling the Secretary of State to confer on the funding councils "such additional functions as he thinks fit", and empowering him to attach conditions to any grants he makes to the funding councils. The funding councils in turn will be empowered to attach conditions to any payment they

make. An institution's failure to comply with any conditions would require it to refund (with interest) any payment made. These clauses, says the AUT, will "undermine the universities' traditional independence".

The bill makes no reference to contract funding. The significance of this omission is not yet clear. The Department of Education and Science thought the term 'contract' would introduce excessive legal and bureaucratic complications. Nevertheless, Education Secretary Kenneth Baker said that he wished to see a "contractual relationship" established between the funding councils and the institutions, although the contracts "would not be enforceable in courts of law". Tenure will be abolished by amendments to university statutes and charters by government-appointed commissioners. The changes would mean that academic staff could be dismissed for redundancy ("whether or not in pursuance of a scheme established for the purpose") or "for good cause". The absence of a specific clause safeguarding academic freedom has been condemned by the AUT and CVCP, who will be pressing for an amendment.

Simon Hadlington

Successful launch for Ariane

Paris

ARIANESPACE, the Paris-based company operating Europe's commercial space rockets, successfully launched an Ariane 2 rocket during the night of Friday, 20 November. Flight 20 placed the West German TV-SAT 1 direct-broadcasting satellite into geostationary transfer orbit. The satellite, the first of its kind in Europe, will enable four television channels to be received by householders throughout West Germany, including West Berlin (and therefore, in principle, East Berlin), part of Austria and eastern Switzerland, using only a small dish antenna.

The launch, the second since Ariane-space resumed commercial operations after problems with Ariane's third-stage motor, made use of the recently built second Ariane launch complex at Kourou in French Guiana. The success of flight 20 will bring a further boost of confidence to a nervous European space industry, and is certain to be interpreted by member states of the European Space Agency as confirmation of the wisdom of their recent massive investment in a long-term space programme centred around the next generation of Ariane 5 rockets (see *Nature* 330, 195; 1987).

Peter Coles

Arab-Israeli cooperation goes public

Rehovot

A COOPERATIVE science project that has been kept secret for five years was made public last week: Israeli and Arab researchers are working together in the struggle against cancer.

The French Cancer Research Association has been responsible for the cooperation, sponsoring colloquia on cancer in the Mediterranean. "The political climate has hitherto ruled out publicity", says Professor Michael Feldman, a participant from the Weizmann Institute in Israel. "Now there is some improvement in that climate, and so my colleagues and I feel that we can afford to go public." Feldman and Professor Nejib Mourali of the Salah Azaiz Institute in Tunis organized this year's colloquium in Paris, together with Professor Gerard Milhaud of the Saint-Antoine Hospital in Paris and Mr Jacques Crozumarie, president of the French Cancer Research Association. Among those who attended the meeting were scientists and physicians from Israel, Tunisia, France, Egypt, Morocco, Kuwait and Lebanon.

The potential for collaboration between Arab and Israeli researchers was evident from a presentation by Mourali and other Tunisians about inflammatory breast cancer, which accounts for almost 40 per cent of breast cancer in North Africa. A method used in Israel for measuring TNF (tumour necrosis factor) could be useful to cancer researchers in Tunisia.

Scientific collaborations between Arab and Israeli researchers are extremely difficult to conduct because of the political animosity they generate from extremists on both sides. Even with Egypt, a country that has diplomatic relations with Israel, scientific exchanges are rare, despite areas of common research interest. For example, Israeli researchers have been interested in studies of urinary bladder cancer, a disease that is common in Egypt and is unusual because it causes far fewer metastases than do other malignancies. For their part, Egyptians have been closely following Israeli attempts to produce a vaccine against bilharzia, a debilitating, snail-borne disease endemic to Egypt.

Feldman looks forward to the day when Arab and Israeli scientists will meet freely, not only at colloquia in France, but also in each other's laboratories. But that day will have to wait "until the politicians get their act together", he says. "If it depended on the scientists, peace would long since have come to the entire Middle East."

Nechemia Meyers