Universities of the Empire

With the selection of a very distinguished band of chairmen, whose names are announced this morning, another definite stage is reached in the long and elaborate preparations for the Congress of Universities of the Empire. The Congress is to meet in London for four days' formal discussion and debate, and to remain in London for nearly another month. Its members will be drawn from every quarter of the British Empire where Universities exist. They will be delegates carefully chosen by their respective States as best qualified to discuss the common and special problems of British Universities, no two of which will be represented altogether. Not only in completeness, but in the difference which distinguishes a body of picked representatives from a haphazard collection of University men, the Congress bids fair to mark a great stride forward from any previous gathering of the kind. The organizers are building on the foundations laid down by their predecessors. With considerable experience at their disposal, they have been able to avoid many blunders and risks of wasting time. The subjects for debate have been chosen as carefully as the men who are to debate them, and they are wisely limited, not only to the special function of Universities in education, but to those problems of University work which are most urgent at the moment. According to the programme which we published last November in the Educational Supplement of The Times, they fall into two main divisions—the first consisting of questions affecting the relations of British Universities to one another, the second embracing the relations of Universities towards their teachers and students and their teaching. The Congress will be assisted by a Council, with its various committees. The appointment of the chairmen, in fact, is the last of a series of careful arrangements, extending now over many months, and designed to ensure that the Congress shall arrive at practical results.

It is, we think, of real importance that the practical possibilities of a Congress of the kind should be thoroughly weighed and understood beforehand by every one concerned in it. No doubt the mere fact of its meeting at all will in itself be an advantage of a very practical kind, since it is bound in any case to lead to the interchange and broadening of ideas, and to that personal acquaintance which is the first step to common action. But, as we show in greater detail in another column, there are certain obvious directions in which a Congress of Universities, held at this particular stage, has the opportunity of making definite progress in mutual assistance. There is the growing movement first and foremost, in favour of an easier interchange of teachers and students. No one questions the enormous value of such a service, for which, for example, Canadian schoolboys could be readily admitted to the schools of History at Oxford or Medicine at Edinburgh, while young Englishmen in their turn were enabled to study agriculture at Guelph, without dislocating the continuity of their education. Enough has been done already by individuals to show the real demand for a "free intercourse in students"; but the conditions of assurance to the various Universities of the Empire are still far too various and confined to admit of migration in any but exceptional cases. If the Congress does nothing else, it can achieve a work of the highest Imperial value by devising a common bridge from the schools to the Universities of the Empire. The case for a constant interchange of teachers is equally persistent; if their work is to be fresh and informed. Here, again, something has been done already by individual enterprise, and it is reasonable to hope that the Congress will suggest opportunities of doing more. There are certain courses of study, in particular, for which the smaller Universities have only an occasional demand. A little co-operation in the arrangement of their time-tables would often enable the same Professor to serve a number of them, so that they would actually secure better teaching at smaller cost. It need hardly be added that every project of the kind will be immensely simplified if the Congress determines to perpetuate its existence by the creation of a Central University Bureau with a permanent "Secretariat."

The hope of definite results is all the brighter because the Universities are coming together at an auspicious moment in their own development and in that of the Empire which they serve. The last few years have been a period of immense activity in the creation of Universities of the modern type, and they have seen unprecedented changes in the ancient foundations. Both alike have been called upon to meet new demands and to change their institutions. The occasion of the Congress as the training-ground of a small governing class has been immensely expanded. It is recognized everywhere that for the future no class and no occupa-

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