

\$13m university request dropped

By FANNY WONG

A REQUEST for \$13 million to pay for further work at the third university — plagued by a huge cost overrun — was yesterday withdrawn from the Legislative Council Finance Committee.

The withdrawal, by the University and Polytechnic Grants Committee (UPGC), was announced by the Chief Secretary, Sir David Ford, who is the chairman of the Finance Committee, just before the item was to be discussed.

Legislators had vowed to block the request.

The money would have paid for site investigation and planning for the phase three development of the Hongkong University of Science and Technology (HKUST) to cater for the intake of 10,100 full-time equivalent students by the year 2000 — an increase of 3,100 from 1996-97.

Speaking after the session, UPGC chairman Mr Andrew Li, said the committee originally recommended 12 priority projects for funding in 1992-93.

"Taking into account the sentiment expressed by the Education Commission at



Sir David Ford . . . anticipated legislators' opposition to funding for HKUST's phase three development.

its meeting held on February 29, this year . . . I advised that consideration of one item, for site investigation and planning for HKUST phase three, should be deferred until the Governor-in-Council has made a firm decision on the student number target for the university during the post-1994-95 period," he said.

Mr Li said the Education Commission maintained that there should be a period of consolidation after 1994-95.

He said the UPGC was reviewing further expansion plans and would make a preliminary recommendation early next year on student targets for 1995-98.

Councillors had said they would block funding for the phase three development because they doubted the need for such rapid expansion in the tertiary sector.

After some heated debate, legislators agreed to approve other UPGC funding requests, including commitments and increases in com-

mitments totalling \$838 million for 11 capital projects.

During the discussions, councillors also expressed concern about the funding request for the development of City Polytechnic which would allow an increase of up to 13,500 full-time equivalent students.

Legislator Mr Cheung Man-kwong was concerned that once members approved the funding it would commit the Finance Committee to extra financial provisions in any additional student intake not yet approved by legislators.

Mr Cheung wanted categorical assurances from the UPGC that yesterday's approval of funds to City Polytechnic, which amounted to \$44.3 million, only committed the finance body to grant funds relating to the student targets for 1994-95.

Any later increase in student intake would have to be approved by the legislators after the completion of the 1993-94 review of the tertiary sector expansion plan.

Mr Li and the Secretary for Education and Manpower, Mr John Chan Cho-chak, both agreed to offer such assurances.