

Reform, yes...but not like this

There is much talk of immediate and drastic change in the organisation of research in the French academic world.

President Sarkozy strongly expressed his determination to reshape our institutions during a speech at Orsay University in late January in honour of Albert Fert, who shared the Nobel prize for physics last year.

The speech came just a few days after publication of the Attali Commission report, 21 of whose 316 propositions for setting growth free (“libérer la croissance”) in France were aimed at improving the efficiency of the higher education and research system.

Loudly announced reforms, as well as rumours of drastic changes, create real worries among the academic population: worries now being amplified by a tense political climate surrounding this month’s municipal elections.

Besides, a clear strategic evolution of French research has already started. Three years ago, the previous government launched a national research agency, the Agence Nationale de la Recherche, to deliver contracts for research teams involved in pre-determined programmes of economical or societal impact. As a result, funding for fundamental research dropped significantly.

Another step was taken after the presidential elections in June last year, when a law referred to as “loi Pécresse” (after the research minister, Valérie Pécresse) was quickly passed by parliament. It imposed new rules for the autonomy of universities, the election of their presidents, the selection of professors, budget management, the ownership of buildings, and so on. At the time, several observers warned that universities in France were not mature enough for such increased responsibilities. There are more than 80 French universities, too many and too diverse to meet one standard research level. Many of them were created with missions that reflect local political interests and would not be able to develop an ambitious and autonomous research policy.

For the time being, scientific strategy is in the hands of large national research institutions. The largest, the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), was created after the second world war and played a key role in the revival of French research. The CNRS is fully multidisciplinary and mostly devoted to basic research.

At Orsay, Sarkozy declared that universities would, from now on, be at the heart of scientific activity in France, as they are in most developed countries. He said that the CNRS would no longer be a

performer but that it would focus on distributing funds for fundamental research and on managing large-scale infrastructure projects. At the same time, he announced a substantial increase in research funding for the ANR, which would focus on domains chosen by government and parliament, and more spending on 10 campuses, still to be chosen, to help them to achieve better international visibility. Sarkozy also suggested that some brilliant young scientists should be offered well-paid but non-permanent jobs, thus loosening the employment security that is traditional in French academic careers.

During a large meeting in Paris last week, around 600 laboratory heads demanded that the CNRS should be left alone. In particular, they rejected the idea of splitting the agency into separate mono-disciplinary institutions linked in a group. In this context of turmoil, our three learned societies of mathematics, physics and chemistry have jointly expressed our concern and published articles promoting our ideas about the ongoing reforms.

We do acknowledge the urgent need to improve the standing of universities, as stated by the “loi Pécresse”. However, we doubt that high-level research can be concentrated in a few large-scale centres, and we advocate the free development of excellence niches in smaller places. In addition, we strongly stress the importance of fundamental research blossoming independently of imposed programmes, and with sufficient funding secured for long enough periods in order to permit the exploration of original and daring topics. Technological breakthroughs emerge from fundamental research freely undertaken by scientists, rather than dictated by politicians. In that respect, the CNRS today plays a prominent role at a national scale and it should go on doing so.

Our learned societies point to the advantages of the permanent jobs that PhDs can secure at a relatively young age. This is indeed a strong asset of the French system, which attracts many young and brilliant researchers from abroad—around 30 per cent of CNRS’s recruits in maths and physics are foreign. The learned societies also insist that such careers should be made more attractive by substantially increasing pay—which is among the lowest in western Europe—improving the working conditions, adapting the teaching and administrative duties, and evaluating research activity periodically at the national level.

Lastly, we advocate better links between university and industry. This is a key for innovation, and meets the wishes of the government and the needs of the country.

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