



Public research in France

A Change of Direction?

Photo: Fotoblog/ Xtra vlgant

A new socialist government has been elected in France, promising to correct the excesses of the Sarkozy years. It has launched public consultations (*Assises*) to ask French researchers about the future direction of public research and higher education. Jeremy Garwood looks at the 'mad reforms' inherited from the previous government. What is the current outlook for French public research?

On May 15th, 2012, Francois Hollande was elected President of France. His mentor, Francois Mitterrand, had been the previous President from the left-wing of French politics, reigning for 14 years until 1995. One of Mitterrand's key policies in the 1980s had been to finance a huge expansion in French public research and higher education. However, since then, under the right-wing presidencies of Jacques Chirac (1995-2007) and Nicolas Sarkozy (2007-12), there has been an inexorable tendency to reduce the budget for universities and the public research organisations (CNRS, INSERM, etc.).

There has also been a rise in political belief that there should be fundamental changes as to how and why research is conducted. In line with neo-liberal ideas from other countries, notably the US and the UK, France signed up to two European treaties (the Bologna declaration in 1999, the Lisbon Strategy 2000) that openly placed public research at the service of economic growth and competitiveness.

In France, the implementation of these ideas has seen a succession of laws, starting

in 1999 with the Law for Innovation and Research (permitting academics to obtain patents and create start-up companies). Then there was the standardisation of French university diplomas with the rest of Europe in 2002 (the LMD = License/Masters/Doctorate), followed by the Law for Research (2006), the Law for the autonomy of universities (LRU 2007) and finally the introduction of 'initiatives of excellence' in 2010.

Sauvons la recherche (SOS Research)

However, the economic preoccupations of the French government have not often received a favourable reception from France's researchers. Notably, there was a very large nationwide protest in 2003 against large funding cuts to public research by President Chirac's government. Despite declaring research to be one of the nation's highest priorities, the public research budget fell from 1% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2002 to 0.8% in 2005.

To coordinate the protest movement, the association *Sauvons la Recherche* (SOS Research) was founded. Worried and angry researchers at all levels became politi-

cally active with highly mediatised protest marches, petitions and the resignation *en masse* of all research directors from their administrative duties. In April 2004, the government released blocked finances and promised to fully consult representatives of the research community before making any further changes.

In response, SOS Research co-ordinated a national debate on the future of public research. In summer 2004, *Etats généraux* (public assemblies) were held to discuss the contemporary state of French research and how it might, through judicious reforms, evolve in the future. From 30 regional gatherings, a national *Etats généraux* met in October 2004 and presented its final written recommendations for reform.

Unfortunately, the government largely ignored the report of the *Etats généraux*. Instead, its 2006 Law on Research introduced radical new reforms aimed at making research more responsive to political demands and economic priorities. It created the AERES, a new national agency for the assessment and evaluation of research and higher education establishments that

used politically appointed assessors rather than the elected representatives from existing peer reviews.

It also centralised new forms of project-based research funding to be administered by ANR (the national research agency). New cooperations were facilitated between different areas of public and private research, notably by creating the PRES (research poles of research and higher education) and research networks based around politically-defined research themes (see *LT* 01/2008: *French research reforms: Chance for change*).

A speech full of lies and insults

To make matters worse for researchers who were already upset, Nicolas Sarkozy won the 2007 Presidential election. Another new law, the LRU (Law relative to the liberties and Responsibilities of Universities) was introduced by Valerie Pécresse, his Minister for Research and Higher Education, bringing radical changes to the whole statute of the French university system. Contrary to the tight political control

that the 2006 Law on Research had just introduced, the key element of this Law was that the universities would no longer be directly controlled by central government, either financially or administratively (see *LT* 02/2008: *Less control, more efficiency?*).

There were a whole succession of protests at these reforms but the biggest French university strike since May 1967 was finally sparked off when Sarkozy told researchers what he thought about them on 22nd January 2009 (see *LT* online 19/03/09: *Sarkozy's scientific faux-pas*). Sarkozy contrasted the success of Albert Fert, the 2007 Nobel Prize-winning CNRS physicist, with the rest of France's researchers who were failing to achieve significant results despite considerable means. He made mocking references to researchers and how (he thought) they worked. He berated them for being "tired" after just two years of his reforms and promised them more to come.

Researchers were quick to reply. Albert Fert severely criticised Sarkozy's reforms, "Research and higher education deserve better than these incoherent and counter-

productive measures!" Alain Trautmann for SOS Research said the speech was full of "lies and insults" and had created "shame and anger" among scientists. And the 128 members of the Institut Universitaire de France recorded their "stupefaction" at the President's speech, defending the "internationally recognised quality and diversity" of French research, and repudiated Sarkozy's "sarcasm" and "untruths".

Le Grand Emprunt (the Big Loan)

University lecturers and researchers began a national strike in February. However, in the general confusion, they failed to find a joint platform. The strikes slowly came to an end defused by promises of new funds for research and higher education. But this time the government didn't need a Law, they needed a Loan!

In June 2009, Sarkozy announced that France would borrow money from the financial markets in order to provide funding for a whole range of projects designed to help France get out of the economic crisis of 2008/09, improve economic growth,

innovation, research, etc., etc. The solution to financing the future was a financial solution! (see *LT* 01/2010: *The “Big Loan”*).

In August 2009, Sarkozy created a commission to find the solution (that he’d already announced) presided by two former prime ministers, Michel Rocard and Alain Juppé. After due reflection, they fixed the amount of the ‘Big Loan’ at 35 billion euros.

Sarkozy declared the biggest winners would be public researchers and universities with 11 billion euros. Even in 2012, this is quite a lot of money but the government’s public announcements tended to play down (the fact) that this loan was to be re-invested.

In effect, the French government borrowed a large sum of money at a certain interest rate then divided it into capital allocations. What was to be finally available was not the capital itself but the interest obtained from re-investing it. Such re-investments were to be limited to modest goals (no wild gambling on the stock exchange) of around 3% per year (if that).

No investment for the future

The beneficiaries of the Big Loan were grouped under the name *Investissements d’avenir* (investments for the future). In 2010, the capital for universities was divided into a series of excellence programmes administered by the ANR. France’s 85 universities were told to compete for Equipex (equipment of excellence), Labex (laboratories of excellence) and the biggest of all, Idex (initiatives of excellence). There was also to be a Plan Campus, to encourage universities to enter into public-private partnerships in order to finance (through further financial deals) the renovation of the crumbling infrastructure, for which they were now autonomously responsible.

The remaining 20 billion-odd euros were for programmes that favoured research with economic aims, such as ‘Oséo’ to finance small industry (€2 billion), research on the digital economy (€4 billion), transport (€3 billion), etc.

Christine Lagarde, the Economy Minister (and current head of the International Monetary Fund) made assurances that the Big Loan would “pay for itself by 2020”. She predicted that the *Investissements d’avenir* would boost France’s economic growth by an average 0.3% per year.

Bertrand Monthubert, President of SOS Research (2007-09), joined the national direction of the Socialist Party as their advisor on research and higher education. He denounced the Big Loan and future in-

vestment programmes as one big political manipulation that would destabilise the whole French research system (*Nouvel Obs* 27/6/11: *Grand emprunt: la manipulation des investissements d’avenir*).

The government now had to find money to pay back the interest on their Big Loan, to be “compensated by a reduction in current funding”, and sure enough, the announcement of the Grand Emprunt led to a reduction in 2010 of 125 million euros for the ministries for research and higher education (MIREES), which immediately translated as a cut in the finances of all labs and lab groups. In 2011, the CNRS budget was reduced by 11%.

Meanwhile, none of the ‘investissements d’avenir’ was awarded until 2011 and the capital sums allocated to successful projects only subsequently began to ar-

derlying the functioning of research. If re-elected the future for research would be extremely grim” (*Mediapart* 4/01/12).

“In the current context, we need a clean break from the organisational research structures put in place during the Sarkozy years. It is necessary to support the research structures conceived to work on a long-term scale. Not to multiply structures like the ANR (funding agency) or AERES (evaluation agency) or Labex and Idex (tools for restructuring research and higher education which in effect remove from the research organisations the possibility of directing a research policy).”

SOS Research published a formal summary of its position in February (*Ce que veut SLR*).

“In the last decade, reforms have been occurring ever more rapidly, creating new



Photo: Matthieu Regier, CC-by

Francois Hollande – Is he the awaited saviour of public research in France?

rive in small instalments. But even then, it was only the interest from the re-investment of these sums that could finally be used to fund projects!

Sarkozy’s research legacy

By this time, attention was shifting towards the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2012. It should come as no surprise to learn that many French researchers did not want to see Sarkozy re-elected.

“Research to reconstruct after the Sarkozy years,” wrote Alain Trautmann, immunologist and co-founder of SOS Research, who stated that “Nicolas Sarkozy has amply shown his capacity to make announcements without any follow-up and his abysmal ignorance of the principles un-

derlying the functioning of research. If re-elected the future for research would be extremely grim.” They made a plea to the Presidential candidates: “Today we are stuck in a tangled and catastrophic situation – only rapid and energetic measures will enable us to get of it. It is urgent to stop these mad reforms and the destruction of our public system of Research and Higher Education!”

With Hollande comes hope?

Francois Hollande formally became President of France on the morning of 15th May, 2012. After lunch, he made a very symbolic trip to the nearby Institut Curie, the cancer research centre founded by Marie Curie. He paid homage to the memory of the Polish immigrant who had come to

incarnate “research, progress and science”, being awarded the Nobel Prize for Physics in 1903 and the Nobel Prize for Chemistry in 1911. Hollande declared that Marie Curie was a symbol of “women, research, integration, rediscovered unity, and science”. Multiply symbolic!

Might the new President at last offer hope for positive change to a badly shaken system of public research and higher education? During the presidential elections, Hollande had promised he would hold *Assises* for research and higher education, in order to get a true picture of its current state and what researchers wanted to see changed and why.

The parliamentary elections this June gave Hollande’s Socialist Party the absolute majority at the National Assembly confirming it as the party of government. He named a relatively unknown politician from Grenoble, Genevieve Fioraso, as his Minister of Research and Higher Education.

On 11th July 2012, Fioraso formally announced that there would be *Assises* (a

congress to discuss the foundations) of research and higher education under the slogan “a shared ambition for the future of our country” (see below).

How bad did the research environment become under Sarkozy?

Official figures for 2010 gave Higher Education a budget of 27.2 billion euros. R&D had a total of 42.7 billion euros (2.26% GDP), of which 16.3 billion euros were spent on public research (0.87% GDP).

For several years, however, there have been accusations that the highly mediated political announcements of extra funding were more often re-distributions of existing funds away from the universities and research organisations towards *new*, half-baked initiatives and structures. The range of promises made to boost university finances have not been honoured, leaving many universities on the verge of bankruptcy.

Fioraso, the new Minister, confirmed that there was truth in both accusations: “We knew during the presidential campaign

that a lot of additional funds that were announced as new by the previous government were, in reality, just re-distributions of money towards grants for projects at the expense of the recurrent funding system. We knew the financial state of certain universities but I confess that I was still surprised to discover the budget deficits that our predecessors had left for us” (interview in *La revue socialiste* 1/09/12).

A 400 million deficit

For the year 2013, she has so far found a deficit of 400 million euros. Fioraso says she has asked the government for more money, “It’s certainly not much out of a ministry budget of 22 billion euros. But the room for manoeuvre is not great.”

In July, Fioraso told the French Senate that she was well aware that French researchers had suffered under the previous government, “The scientific community has been shaken about by successive reforms, imposed from the top without enough discussion, and by the frenzy of grant appli-

cations for the *investments for the future*, all formatted differently. Lab directors have lost a lot of time filling out forms, to the detriment of their research!”

“We must leave fundamental research to work in peace. Researchers shouldn’t waste their energy permanently chasing after funds!”

She said the government’s policy objectives were to give “a renewed ambition to research”, restoring dialogue with researchers, and through “concrete measures” designed to simplify the landscape of French research and higher education. “Go and try to explain our current system to a foreign delegation: you’ll quickly give up faced with its complexity!”

One of the immediate problems, however, was the financial state of France’s 85 universities. “Not less than 23 universities have been in deficit for two years.” Fioraso lamented, “The state of affairs we have inherited shows that there has been a lot of irresponsibility. We have found that 50% of universities are in a difficult situation. We have seen the mess and it’s very wor-

rying!” The university presidents are also “very worried”. Louis Vogel, president of the CPU confirmed that the “big question for the universities, today, is that of financial means – first to finish 2012, then for 2013. In other words, how do we hold out until December and beyond? We’ve had contact with the Minister. The new team is discovering the extent of the budgetary deficiency. There are serious worries about the State’s engagement towards universities. Will they respect them?” (*Les Echos*, 11/09/12).

Assises for a better future

For the 2012 budget, Vogel said the government had promised to unblock funds that had been attributed but temporarily frozen. “Will it happen? We’re expecting around 70 million euros but these are not new funds, just funds that had already been promised to us, voted by parliament and on which we’re counting.”

Furthermore, it seems the previous government had miscalculated the ongoing increase in the overall salaries of university

staff. “It failed to take account of career promotions according to the civil service pay scales – this represents another 40 million euros. In total, 110 million. It’s not enormous for the State budget but it’s vital for universities.” The new government has already committed itself to creating 5,000 new jobs in higher education over the next five years. Will they have the means to pay for them?

Fioraso has said that all of these budgetary questions will be addressed within the normal committees for consultation.

The *Assises* are a large public consultation into the future direction of research and higher education. To conduct them, Fioraso named an independent piloting committee, presided by Françoise Barré-Sinoussi (the INSERM researcher, who won the 2008 Nobel Prize for her work on the HI virus). Contributors have been told to focus their attention on three points:

1. How to improve the success of students in higher education. Notably, in the first years at university, there is a huge failure rate with up to half of the students fail-

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2. The reorganisation of research. How should the research institutions and universities be organised? This includes questions about international strategies, the role of research in the economy, its social and environmental impact. In particular, the respective roles of the national research organisations and universities, as well as the recently-created national agencies and alliances “will be reaffirmed or redefined”.

3. The third objective calls for a revision of the direction and administration of all the establishments and networks. The form and relative degree of autonomy will be re-examined, as well as the recently-created programmes for cooperation between the establishments.

Distilled reflections

Between the end of August and mid-September 2012, this national committee

To provide an opportunity for everyone else to give their views, a total of 25 Regional Assises were to be held throughout France in mid-October. Contributions over the internet were called for from everyone who participates in French research and higher education: from ordinary citizens, students, professional scientists, academics, social and economic groups, etc.. These written texts can be up to four pages long. Each submission was to be read by the Regional Assises and will be published online for general consultation. Balanced reports summarising the contributions were to have been prepared by 1st November.

All of these reports will be considered by the National Assises on 26th-27th November. A final national report will be formally presented to the government in December.

Based on these distilled reflections, the Minister intends to present new legislation at the beginning of 2013. She has also already indicated that in addition to new



Will public research now get a bigger share of the state budget?

invited a total of 88 organisations for direct hearings. These included the research institutions (CNRS, INSERM, INRA, etc.), the universities, the syndicats (trade unions), the government research agencies (ANR, AERES, etc.), student associations, industry groups and, of course, the protest groups, Sauvons la recherche (SOS research) and Sauvons l'université (SOS university). In addition to the auditions, the organisations presented four-page written summaries that can be consulted online (www.assises-esr.fr).

legislative proposals, there will be *corrections* made to the law relative to the liberties and responsibilities of universities (the LRU from 2007) and the law for the orientation and programming of research (the big research law from 2006).

Revoking earlier reforms

For the protest groups, SOS research and SOS university, it is clear that many of the reforms introduced over the last six years have had a disastrous effect on French research. C3N (the national committee for

scientific research) shares the same view. It contains the scientific councils of the CNRS, Research Institutes and Presidents of the different Research Sections. At its audition before the *Assises* on August 29th, it requested that many of the reforms from the Sarkozy era be revoked. For example:

► **AERES**

For C3N, the unelected research evaluation agency has got to go. There are already extensive systems of evaluation within the French research system that are more dem-

and short-term projects over more ambitious, riskier, long-term projects. Lacking funds, the material and common services essential for the good functioning of laboratories has degraded."

In effect, to finance the projects of the ANR, there have been corresponding cuts in the recurrent budgets of the research organisations. Previously, researchers (who in the French system are civil servants with stable jobs) could rely on a modest basic funding each year, applying for additional funds in

that has produced "multiple perverse effects". They say it's a waste of time. "Researchers are obliged to constantly re-orientate their work in order to adapt it to the priorities of the funding agencies, to the detriment of the scientific logic of their research."

For SOS research, one of the worst consequences of the ANR has been the continuous increase in job insecurity among researchers. "Jobs based on short-term contracts are multiplied by the obligation to get financing for short-term projects." The situation in France has exploded several-fold in the last few years. Around 45,000 people now work in public research and higher education on short-term contracts, around a quarter of the total. "In some labs, they represent 80% of the members."

Insecure short-term jobs

For C3N, the multiplication of project-based funding in France has "resulted in a very major growth of insecure (precarious) scientific employment. Young post-docs are more and more often obliged to take on a succession of short-term employment contracts as research assistants and university teachers".

This situation has become common in other countries but in France it used to be different! "The French specificity, largely envied by foreign colleagues, is the statute of full-time researcher for life, despite a modest salary. A great attraction at the beginning of their careers is the liberty that this allows scientists in their research."

Fioraso has said that the government is committed to a plan to "re-absorb" job insecurity in research and higher education.

In conclusion, C3N says that the ANR must lose its primary funding role or "disappear completely", reallocating its budget to the research and higher education establishments, "notably the CNRS".

► *Le Grand Emprunt and investissements d'avenir*

Now that the financial logic of the Big Loan has sunk in more widely, there are increasing calls to completely scrap it and its programmes. For SOS research, "under the cover of excellence and autonomy" they have created anti-democratic structures that have introduced aggressive competition for reduced funding. They have also resulted in the "destruction of long-established co-operations, endemic bureaucracy, the degrading of their statutes and their working conditions". SOS University has called for an immediate cancelling of the IDEX and a full financial review.



Off to new shores, full of research money!

Photo: Fotolia/Stobitsov Alexandre

ocratic and competent. AERES "has contributed to the introduction of a managerial, authoritarian and rigid control of research units. It has lost the capacity to see developments on a longer timescale due to the rigidity of its four-year assessments. It has simply made assessments more complex and more bureaucratic – assessments are more and more based on projects as the strategic base for research laboratories, whereas the actual research achieved by them is less and less the objective of a real scientific evaluation, i.e. collegial and deliberate, looking at the content of work performed and published by the totality of the research team." C3N proposes "the pure and simple suppression of AERES".

► **ANR**

For SOS research, the ANR has "profoundly undermined the cohesion of research laboratories that have constantly seen their basic funding reduced, preventing them from embarking on scientific initiatives, while obliging lab groups to turn to other funding agencies. This new mode of funding has favoured competition at the expense of collaboration and cooperation,

exceptional circumstances. But through the ANR, the government had introduced three-year funding with more money allocated to fewer projects, in line with models found in other countries but in contradiction with the existing French research system.

For example, in the absence of recurrent funding, many researchers found themselves starved of basic funds. Established CNRS researchers are obliged to re-formulate their research activity in terms of ANR projects. But with a relatively low success rate (<20%), many researchers now rely on a spirit of sharing of any available funds among their lab colleagues.

Meanwhile, in its own presentation to the *Assises*, the ANR boasted that it had financed 9,900 projects in seven years.

For SOS research, it's time to "redistribute the funds from the ANR to finance the universities and research institutions". They want to collectively re-define the way scientific projects are funded, offering more than the "limited logic of funding proposals on short-term grants".

C3N agrees that ANR represents a mode of funding based on short-term evaluation

Bertrand Monthubert, who was elected President of the University of Toulouse III in May, immediately suspended its Plan Campus. Genevieve Fioraso confirmed that these public-private partnerships were particularly suspect. "Of the 5 billion euros, 2.2 billion were for the building projects and the rest is there to reimburse the financial companies. They're the big winners of the 'policy of excellence' under the old government. And what are the results? Four years later, I don't see a lot of foundation stones laid!"

► Government subsidies for private research – the *Credit d'impôt recherche* (CIR)

Where can the French government find the money to compensate for the years of re-distribution and reduction under Chirac and Sarkozy? SOS research has three suggestions:

First, it could recover all the money allocated to the various politically-inspired projects launched by the Sarkozy government. This would fit in with C3N's proposal that the CNRS and other public research organisations should regain "a central role in coordinating and organising research in close collaboration with the universities".

Banks were biggest winners

Secondly, it could do something about the *Credit d'impôt recherche* (CIR). This is a tax credit designed to subsidise private R&D. Sarkozy's government turned it into a fiscal present for France's largest companies. The CIR went from less than one billion euros in 2004 to more than five billion last year. As C3N remarked, five billion euros is more than twice the total CNRS

budget, salaries and large infrastructure included.

In theory, the CIR is meant to reimburse up to half the cost of R&D in the private sector. However, the 2009 parliamentary report by Gilles Carrez revealed that the biggest winners of the CIR were banks, insurance companies and management consultancies! Using more traditional definitions of R&D, the Senate's finance commission revealed that of four billion euros spent on the CIR in 2009, only around 200 million matched actual private sector investment in research!

The Hollande government, though, already appears to have decided to keep this money to encourage innovative research in the private sector. Fioraso said that they would limit it but not diminish it. Instead, they would "redirect the money towards companies that are growing and innovative".

The third solution proposed by SOS research (and many other groups in French society) is that perhaps it's time to claw back some of the tax advantages that the Sarkozy government gave to large companies and rich individuals.

Express yourselves!

French research and higher education has been profoundly transformed by a decade of reforms that were largely imposed without discussion. Despite the usual scepticism about the real intentions of the new government, the *Assises* represent a rare opportunity for French researchers and academics to say what they want. Are they seizing it?

JEREMY GARWOOD

ONE FINE DAY IN THE LAB...

BY LEONID SCHNEIDER

