

"we really are open and will listen to changes".

One initial proposal that has already been modified is that CNRS would be deprived of the authority to create laboratories, such as those on its campuses at Gif-sur-Yvette on the outskirts of Paris. The revised decree allows for the creation of CNRS laboratories, but these would be the exception. "We are not against CNRS opening new labs, but as a general rule it should take place in discussions with universities," says Courtillot.

The major point of contention over the draft decree concerns the balance of forces between the agency and the universities, a topic with a long history. The agency was created in 1939 to compensate for the weak research base in the universities. Indeed, today the only French universities carrying out international-level research are those with large teams of CNRS researchers.

Many researchers say that university science is still weak, and that it would be premature to increase their power over CNRS-financed research. Observers argue that French universities tend to put student and local needs first, and cannot properly define or evaluate national research strategies.

The vice-chancellors and the scientific bodies within universities are elected, and this democracy is said to generate a lack of competitiveness. In contrast, the CNRS has rigorous evaluation mechanisms and a reputation for putting scientific excellence first.

A reform of the university system is a prerequisite for any profound reform of CNRS, assert several observers. They argue that, given that university researchers are civil servants, a university laboratory winning a grant would not be freely able to hire researchers, making the idea of a research council meaningless within a French context.

Courtillot agrees that it would be premature to transform CNRS into a research council along the lines of the US National Science Foundation or the UK research councils. But he says the government wants the CNRS to move in this direction, and that the universities should ultimately be the major players in French research.

Courtillot concedes that many universities are not yet capable of taking over responsibilities from the agency, but says that others are ready, and that more will be in time. "In 1988, less than ten of the then 80 French universities were in a position to have their own research policies, but now 40 of the 100 universities are able to do so," he says.

Another ministry proposal is to replace the current system of funding laboratories with one in which individual teams would be financed on the basis of competitive proposals. The idea, says Courtillot, is to blur the boundaries between the institutions, with teams from different research agencies and universities uniting to form new entities and to seek joint project funding. **Declan Butler**

Japan's universities resist plan for greater autonomy

[TOKYO] A bid by the Japanese government to transform national universities into semi-autonomous institutions is meeting strong resistance both from leading academics and from the Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture (Monbusho).

Last December, a proposal to change the status of the nation's two leading universities — Tokyo University and Kyoto University — was omitted from the final version of the government's administrative reform plan (see *Nature* 389, 897; 1997). But it has resurfaced since the appointment of the new prime minister, Keizo Obuchi, who has pledged to carry out drastic reorganization of Japan's administration.

The administrative reform plan, which originally targeted national research institutes attached to government ministries and agencies (see *Nature* 395, 211; 1998), will now also target some of the national universities — including Tokyo and Kyoto.

But the plans are running into strong opposition. Last week Leo Esaki, the Nobel prizewinner and former president of Tsukuba University, said that increased autonomy and drastic changes in their management systems could have negative effects on the universities.

"Given the Japanese universities' lack of competitiveness and management skills, turning them into semi-autonomous bodies with administrative independence will only make things chaotic," said Esaki. He argued



Esaki: warning of negative effects.

that universities needed instead to begin reforms at a fundamental level, such as introducing a proper system of peer review.

Meanwhile, the Council on University Education, chaired by Akito Arima, the education minister and former president of Tokyo University, last week announced plans to set up an independent body to assess the performance of national universities.

The move is seen as a bid to resist the government's plans, including external evaluation of the universities' performance every three to five years, by indicating the universities' willingness to increase their effectiveness without the government's restructuring. They argue it will damage both education and research.

Although the government hopes to finalize its reorganization plans by next January, many predict that Monbusho and the universities will not give in, and may try to generate sufficient political opposition for the government to back down.

But some university researchers support the plans, arguing that the national universities' aversion to greater autonomy hinders the spread of venture businesses and industry/university collaboration. **Asako Saegusa**

US Congress rebuffs data copyright law

[WASHINGTON] Critics of proposed legislation that would assign sweeping copyright protection to commercial online databases scored a victory last week when the US Congress passed a bill with the controversial measure stripped out.

Organizations including the American Association for the Advancement of Science and the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) and the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers had been lobbying for months against the legislation, which was sponsored by Representative Howard Coble (Republican, North Carolina) and Senator Rod Grams (Republican, Minnesota).

The proposed change in copyright law, its opponents say, would stifle the flow of scientific information by granting broad and vaguely defined proprietary rights to data that are now exchanged freely (see *Nature* 394, 410; 1998).

When the measure moved easily through the House of Representatives in May and

was then folded into a larger copyright bill on a fast track for passage, "the visibility of the issue was heightened", according to Prudence Adler of the ARL. An intensive letter-writing and lobbying campaign led to House and Senate negotiators dropping the database provision from the larger copyright bill earlier this month.

Around 50 companies and associations, representing a range of political views and interests, weighed in against the database clause. Several federal agencies also pointed out potential constitutional problems.

By the time of the vote, 15 senators urged that the database clause be dropped because it had not been debated thoroughly and serious disagreements remained.

But Judiciary Committee chairman Orrin Hatch (Republican, Utah) and other Republican leaders promised the bill's sponsors that the database issue will get an early hearing when a new Congress returns to Washington in January. **Tony Reichhardt**