French research support

More clout for CNRS

FRENCH university scientists should be bracing themselves for a radical new year. Last week, the Council of Ministers, the French cabinet, considered the programme of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), the body that supports most basic science in France, and has publicly approved of it.

Why should the council do that? To give CNRS political weight in dealing with ministries other than the ministry of research and industry, to which it belongs, says Pierre Papon, CNRS director-general. Among those ministries is the ministry of national education (MEN), responsible for the universities.

CNRS will be restructuring its relationship with the universities in 1984, says

Concerted selectivity

IN its unusual declaration, the French cabinet has offered its support to CNRS in pursuing a policy of "selectivity and concentration", which echoes the policy of a certain Science and Engineering Research Council across the Channel. In outline, the declaration announces that CNRS will increase cooperation with "all involved in research", including:

- The universities, with which CNRS will sign individual and collective agreements. The declaration foresees "decisions, which will allow the creation of new associations [joint research groups, the principal form of CNRS support] or the closure of others, taken in liaison with the universities and the minister of education, and taking into account the quality of the research, its relevance to national scientific priorities and the balance between regions".

- Other research councils. The declaration singles out INRIA (informatics), CNET (telecommunications), and CNEXO (ocean science).

- Industry, where the declaration foresees more collaboration agreements between CNRS and industry.

- "Social partners", a neologism for trade unions, involving increased research on the impact of new technologies.

- And the regions ("states"), which will see more conventions lasting several years such as those signed with Nord-Pas-de-Calais and Provence-Côte d'Azur, relating CNRS policy to local needs perceived by the (political) regional councils.

The declaration also states that "voluntary mobility of researchers will be encouraged". And this could indeed be an important step for CNRS, for it would allow, for example, a CNRS scientist to leave his or her post for up to 3 years to work in industry, freeing that person's salary and position for the period. This could dramatically increase the fluidity of CNRS laboratories. Robert Walgate

Papon. The 75 universities of France are "too many", which has led to a "balkanization" of university politics. According to Papon, CNRS will in future no longer be able to support all subjects in all universities. All this is further evidence of a tightening grip by CNRS of the distribution of its money in the university system and of an increasing emphasis on its own laboratories. But the picture is not all black for university researchers supported by CNRS. Papon insists that the total value of support will not fall — it will just be distributed differently.

In the past, CNRS guidelines for university support have centred on "excellence". Exactly what the research was about was not of great concern. Now, excellence will be necessary but not sufficient, says Papon; "coherence" with CNRS policy will also be expected. This year, for example, those policies include a regional dimension — a wish to improve support in the north and west, relatively undeveloped scientifically; an emphasis on interdisciplinary research, the barriers between disciplines being felt to be particularly strong in France; and special support for life sciences.

Clearly, this marks an increase in "directive" rather than "responsive" support for science, a matter of debate in many other countries. But France is to go still further. CNRS is to sign — possibly this week — an outline agreement with the "Direction de la Recherche", which with MEN is responsible for the universities. This will mark a new degree of cooperation between the two bodies. Some will fear this development as a device for extending CNRS policy now coloured strongly by its exposure in the ministry of industry and research, and by the aim of the present government of achieving economic growth through science and technology — into university research.

Both MEN and CNRS insist, however, that there will be room for independent policies. There is, however, considerable unease in the universities about the way in which CNRS support and influence will develop, particularly among those who do not see their work as of particular economic relevance. And it has been exacerbated by the removal of "individual aids" — a system whereby CNRS supported individuals with two or three technicians, as a step to becoming an "associated laboratory" of CNRS shared between university and the centre. There are not enough technicians to go round, says CNRS. So such early support is to be limited to a few selected "young groups", while individuals will apply for "free contracts" — two-year grants without technicians that are not designed to lead to associated status.

Robert Walgate

Unesco

US scientists hit by withdrawal

Washington

THE United States' decision to withdraw from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco) by the end of this year has dismayed many US scientists who have worked closely with the agency. They say that Unesco's scientific programmes have generally remained free from the political posturing that has tainted the agency's other activities, and warn that withdrawal may exclude US scientists from valuable international data-sharing agreements.

Formal notice of the decision was delivered to Unesco at the end of December. Under United Nations regulations, the withdrawal will not take effect until 31 December 1984, and the United States will therefore continue to pay its \$50 million contribution (about a quarter of Unesco's budget) for the remainder of this year. Explaining the American decision to pull out, a State Department spokesman said Unesco had politicized virtually every activity it conducted, mismanaged its budget and routinely adopted policies hostile to the institutions of a free society.

Both the National Academy of Sciences and the National Science Foundation (NSF) told the State Department at the end of last year that a decision to pull out could have damaging repercussions for US science. A letter from the academy characterized science as one of Unesco's success stories and pointed out that no alternative machinery existed to service international collaboration concerned with such subjects as the oceans, climate, the solid Earth and the biosphere.

NSF has made a detailed study of Unesco's scientific value for the State Department but its findings have not yet been published. The general view of scientists with knowledge of Unesco, however, is that the benefits of staying in outweigh those of leaving:

- Dr Della Laura, chief of international hydrology at the US Geological Survey, says Unesco's International Hydrology Programme has an excellent record and has successfully steered clear of political issues. If US scientists are unable to continue their participation, she says, the United States will "greatly miss" an arena in which global information of hydrological problems is rapidly exchanged.

- Unesco's activities in the Earth sciences have received similar praise from Dr Lin Hoover, deputy chief of international scientific programmes at the Geological Survey. About 300 American geologists a year take part in research under the Unesco-sponsored International Geological Correlation Programme and their exclusion will force the United States to negotiate countless bilateral agreements