

France

New scourge for universities

In a rather extraordinary and for the universities somewhat disturbing development in French higher education, a principal critic of the French university system has been appointed president of a new universities "evaluation committee".

The man in question, M. Laurent Schwartz, is a highly-respected mathematician at the Ecole Polytechnique, one of the "ivy-league" *grandes écoles* of France. But he is also the author of two influential diatribes attacking the French universities and prescribing certain medicines, such as a greater dose of selection and élitism, which do not appeal to the majority of university staff. These were appointed in the egalitarian boom years after the 1968 student rebellion when the universities both shifted well to the political left and quadrupled in size. To them, a Schwartzian new broom is a fearsome thing.

But how much power will M. Schwartz have? This will not be clear until his new committee, the *Comite National d'Evaluation des Universités* (CNEU), has been in place for a year and delivered its first report. But that this may come around the time of next year's general elections in France, when, according to present opinion polls, the right will return to government, will cause further alarm.

In principle CNEU is being presented as equivalent to Britain's University Grants Committee (UGC), which distributes British universities' annual "recurrent grant" from the Department of Education and Science to cover salaries and basic university expenditure such as heating and building costs. But there are important differences. On the whole, UGC is composed of university heads of department representing a cross-section of academic disciplines. In the face of university cuts, therefore, it has tended to act as a defensive body, the only notable exception being when UGC cut grants to certain smaller, mostly technological universities on the debatable basis that these universities attracted students with poorer A-level grades than others such as Oxford and Cambridge. This, in a sense, was passing the buck.

But the French CNEU promises to be different. Apart from M. Schwartz, the nine members of the "academic" side of the committee will include physicist M. Pierre Aigrain, former science minister under the previous (and conservative) French President, Giscard d'Estaing, alongside other representatives of the *grandes écoles*, and few from the university system itself. The committee is completed by five members of what might be described as an "industrial" side of the committee. Altogether, then, CNEU cannot be described as representative of the universities, as can UGC. Rather, CNEU represents a new structure on top of the universities: a new level of control.

The appointments to CNEU were announced only last week. But its terms of reference were defined in a higher education bill last year. According to these, CNEU will regularly review the work funding of the universities, considering both their research and teaching. CNEU will also measure each university against its multi-annual plan — under which a university

agrees development plans with the ministry of education in exchange for a secure 3-5 year budget.

The committee will also review the new PhD system, which began only this year, and will not report to the minister of education but to the Elysee itself: to the President of the Republic, presently M. François Mitterrand.

It seems possible that M. Mitterrand, new scourge of the universities, while entering from the left, will end up by leaving from well to the right. **Robert Walgate**

NIH

More competition, more disquiet

Washington

THE Reagan administration's plan to restrict to 5,000 the number of extramural research project grants awarded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) is having a marked effect on the priority score required of successful applicants. The estimated aggregate cut-off point for 1985 is 170, although because there have been more high-quality applications than expected, the figure may turn out to be as low as 160. The payline, as the cut-off is called, varies between institutes from less than 150 to over 200.

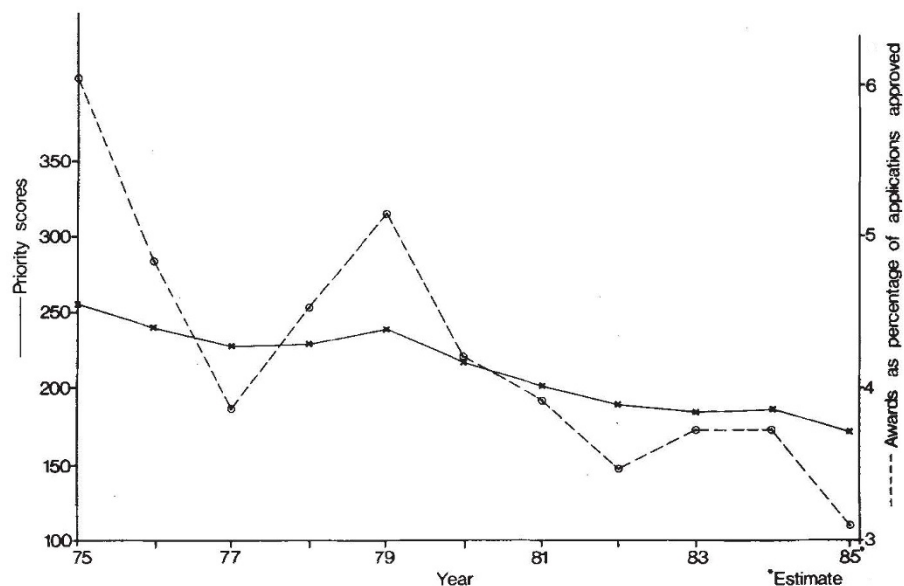
The Congress had requested 6,500 grants for 1985; if it prevails in the argument with the administration, the payline would be around 190. According to the latest rumours, a compromise of around 5,800 grants is likely.

Meanwhile, intramural research at NIH is also facing problems. The administration's proposed budget for NIH intramural research in 1986 is \$561 million, down \$16 million from 1985. NIH officials estimate

that \$619 million would be needed in 1986 to maintain research at its present level.

In addition, the institutes as a whole have to lose 450 man-years from their staff by 30 September, with a reduction of a further 150 man-years during the following year. The number of staff that will have to be lost by September will probably be over 600, because the instruction to reduce staff (from the Office of Management and Budget) was received only in January, one-third of the way into the fiscal year.

The problem is further exacerbated in those institutes already employing more staff than the Office of Management and Budget had assumed. Institutes in this category have initiated a "semi-freeze" policy, whereby two jobs must be lost before a single replacement can be hired. NIH officials are concerned that young untenured researchers are being frozen out and that administrative and domestic staff, who are usually tenured, will as a consequence be a growing proportion of the whole. **Tim Beardsley**



The broken line shows the percentage of grant applications approved by NIH study sections that were actually funded; the solid line shows the so-called "payline" — the priority score that 90 per cent of the funded applications had to better in order to receive funding. Priority scores range from 100 (excellent) to 500 (poor). The 1985 estimates assume 5000 grants this year; the actual number is still under negotiation.