

New French government's windfall for research

- Mitterrand government backs research
- "Flagrant deficiencies" in funding

Paris

FRENCH researchers, who have been feeling ill-treated following two years of government cutbacks in public sector spending, have been given a first taste of what to expect under President François Mitterrand's newly appointed socialist government. Minister-delegate for research Hubert Curien, last week announced that it is too late to cancel the "inadequate" 1988 research budget put together by his predecessor, Jacques Valade. Instead, an extra FF1,230 million (£117 million) will be handed out immediately to halt a net downward trend in research spending since 1986. This injection of cash is in addition to a FF350 million bonus released last week for higher education.

At a press conference on 8 June, Curien did not hide his disapproval of the previous government's research policy. As minister for research when the Fabius government lost power in 1986, Curien saw his long-term plans gradually dismantled over the following two years. Whereas the research budget had been set to increase by 4 per cent annually from December 1985, it has, when inflation is

taken into account, decreased by 6.6 per cent. "This slow-down", says Curien, "will make it impossible to reach the goal we had set of spending 3 per cent of Gross Domestic Product on research by 1990."

The extra cash will be used to underline priorities in the new government's research policy — jobs for researchers and opportunities for collaboration between industry and public-sector research establishments. These measures will be good news for young postdoctorates and doctoral students. Not only are postgraduate grants to be increased by more than one third to FF7,000 per month (affecting 4,630 students), but 150 new research posts are to be created this year. Of these, 85 have been earmarked for the national space research centre (CNES) so that young postdocs will be able to contribute to the long-term space plan approved by the European Space Agency last year. The remaining 65 jobs will be divided between the agricultural research institute (INRA), for biotechnology research, and the medical research institutes (INSERM), for work on cancer, immunology and epidemiology.

Curien has pledged to maintain a policy

French education at all levels a priority

Paris

JUST a few days before the French people went to the polls for the third time in two months — this time to elect representatives for the national assembly — President François Mitterrand kept his election promise of more money for education. The new education and research minister, Lionel Jospin, announced on 1 June after a cabinet meeting that FF1,200 million (£120 million) "emergency funds" are immediately to be made available to reduce "black spots, serious gaps and delays" within secondary and higher education.

About 30 per cent (FF350 million) of the new money will go towards higher education, especially to renovate ageing university buildings (FF100 million) and halls of residence (FF50 million). An extra FF50 million will also be given to libraries for book purchase and documentation.

The statute that allows governments to vote emergency funds cannot be used to create new posts — as education unions want — but 600 higher education administrator jobs cancelled by the previous government will be restored. Jospin has

also reversed a move by his predecessor, Jacques Valade, to reintroduce the two-tier doctorate abandoned in 1984 in favour of the PhD (see *Nature* 332, 388; 1988).

For the longer term, Jospin has confirmed that the new government's 1989 budget will include an extra FF4,000 million for education, to be repeated each year until 1992 in order to reach the FF40,000 million target promised by Mitterrand in his presidential campaign.

Jospin has also decided to allow his minister delegate for research, Hubert Curien, to take an active part in the French space programme — which he helped shape under the previous socialist government (see *Nature* 333, 197; 1988). Responsibility for space in Mitterrand's new government was taken away from the research ministry and given to Paul Quilès, minister for posts and telecommunications, Curien will also be jointly responsible, with industry minister, Roger Faroux, for the ultra-modern science and technology museum, La Villette, as well as for the government's technology innovation body, ANVAR. Peter Coles

of job creation from 1989 in order to offset a gradual ageing among the research community due to a recruitment boom in the 1960s which was not followed up consistently. Similarly, by increasing post-graduate grants, Curien hopes to save the "most brilliant" students from disappearing into industry rather than carrying out work for a PhD.

Of the FF90 million set aside for job creation and training, FF25 million is available for the rest of 1988 to enable about 200 foreign researchers to visit French laboratories. Curien has also cancelled the suspension of 150 engineer and technician posts called for by Valade (one out of every two vacancies) which had "threatened" to paralyse several research teams" dependent on complicated instruments.

Curien's faith in the importance of industrial and technology research is well-known to the French science community. Since this faith also underpinned the previous government's policy of reducing public spending and increasing tax incentives for industrial research and development, many were curious to see how Curien's strategy would differ. The emergency allocations have given some strong clues.

While leaving Valade's FF500 million tax incentive scheme untouched, Curien has doubled the money available this year to the national research and technology fund (FRT) for 11 national priority programmes set up by the previous government (see *Nature* 329, 380; 1987). Under this scheme, awards are made following a call for tenders from private or public sectors. But, says Curien as there was not enough money in the kitty to cope with the demand, only one sixth of the proposals could be financed. Of the projects left on the shelf, those dealing with new ceramic fibres, multi-coated glass and metallurgy are now likely to be supported.

Referring to "flagrant deficiencies" in the money available to "certain organizations and ministries", Curien has promised that medical (especially molecular biology), agricultural and road-safety research will receive a slice of the extra FF725 million available this year. Similarly, ANVAR, the government agency that promotes collaboration between industry and state research institutes will get an extra FF130 million this year. When the conservative government took office in 1986, ANVAR's budget was cut from FF990 million to FF590 million.

Curien has also saved the Oceanographic Vessel of the Future (NCF), being built by IFREMER, the national institute for oceanographic research, from languishing in dry-dock. An extra FF80 million has been released to buy essential equipment, such as a multi-beam sonar probe, that could not be afforded.

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