

Q&A

Research revolution?

Valérie Pécresse has been a member of the French National Assembly (Yvelines department) since 2002. She rose to prominence as the combative spokeswoman for Nicolas Sarkozy's centre-right UMP party during the 2007 presidential race, after which she was appointed minister for higher education and research.



J. HEKIMIAN/GETTY IMAGES

Reforming the country's research organizations and dilapidated universities is quite a challenge to take on.

It is something politicians — particularly those on the right — have paid little attention to, because you are up against such a politically hostile terrain. Every minister who has tried to reform French universities has fallen, so I felt I was taking a big political risk, but modernizing the research and education landscape is of major importance.

What is your vision for this?

With the law on university autonomy (introduced last summer) we will make the universities powerful and independent, in charge of their own budgets, staff and science strategy. We also intend to spend more to help the reforms succeed — that can't be done on existing budgets. We're the only OECD [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development] country that spends less on its university students than on those in high school. On 30 April we launched 'Operation Campus' which invests €5 billion [US\$7.7 billion] in real-estate projects to create a dozen large world-class campuses allied to existing institutions. The logic is to break down the over-compartmentalization of French research.

Some worry that you will dismantle the CNRS, France's basic research agency, and turn it into a funding council.

We are not going to break what works. The CNRS is an incontrovertible player in French research, but we must empower the universities and make them independent. The role of the research organizations will be to steer research strategy at the national level, but I want to reform them to put an end to the dispersion of research and sometimes a lack of overall coherence. For example, biomedical research is spread across the CNRS, INSERM [the national medical research agency] and a series of dedicated agencies that in the past were created for every new priority disease. When Sarkozy announced that he was making Alzheimer's disease a priority, some people

suggested that we create an Alzheimer's agency. That made me want to tear my hair out; we can't go on adding more structures like this. It Balkanizes research, stymies interdisciplinarity and leads to duplication.

How will this change?

A reform announced in April will bring all biomedical research under INSERM, with eight internal institutes representing the main research themes setting national strategies for each. It is INSERM that will organize and articulate the national biomedical strategy in France. The CNRS will propose similar reforms in June.

What will you do about the legendary French bureaucracy?

We absolutely must simplify the bureaucracy. At present, we have some 1,300 laboratories run jointly by the research organizations and the universities. One in four has more than four parent agencies: that's more than four different funding sources, four different accounting and IT systems and four different evaluation systems. We propose a single management agency, the host institution, which will usually be the university. Scientific strategy will continue to be jointly decided, but there will be a single administrative system, and a single consolidated stream for public funding.

Sarkozy told *Nature* last year that his dream was for more French scientists abroad to return home. Is this happening?

Not yet. But when autonomy comes into force in January 2009, universities will be free to recruit who they want, at the salary they want, on contract. The unions say we are killing the civil-servant status enjoyed by researchers. The truth is that only a small proportion of posts will be contracts at the start. Top researchers don't necessarily want civil-servant status. A young scientist, who has done postdocs in the United States, who has a family, won't return to France to earn €2,000 a month as an associate professor. ■

Interview by Declan Butler

See Editorial, page 133.

ON THE RECORD

“Love of God and compassion and empathy leads you to a very glorious place, and science leads you to killing people.”

Ben Stein, star of anti-evolution movie *Expelled*, adds his sensible and rational voice to the science-versus-religion debate, during an evangelical webcast.

SCORECARD

**Dino dung**

Two pieces of 130-million-year-old fossilized droppings fetched US\$960 at a New York auction last week.

**Ancient meteorite**

Meanwhile, at the same auction, the meteoric star of the show, expected to fetch as much as \$2.75 million, was left unsold.



M. SEGAR/REUTERS

OVERHYPED

Virtual lego

The Danish company behind the world's favourite plastic bricks is preparing to launch Lego Universe, letting players build virtual constructions online. Mark Hansen, leader of the new universe, admits it will “never replace the physical experience” of Lego. Quite.

NUMBER CRUNCH

19 is the age of Alia Sabur, the world's youngest professor. She will teach physics at Konkuk University in Seoul.

2 is the number of years before Professor Sabur is able to legally purchase alcohol in her home city of New York.

1717 was the year in which the previous youngest-ever professor was appointed — Colin Maclaurin, who was awarded a professorship by the University of Aberdeen, UK, also at 19 years of age.

Sources: Trinity Broadcasting Network, Reuters, The Independent