

French research wins huge cash boost

President Sarkozy uses 'big loan' to push his reform agenda.

Universities in France are set to receive an €11-billion (US\$16-billion) windfall from a government initiative intended to create an 'Ivy League' of research centres. The cash could help to reverse the decades-long neglect of the country's university system, although the bulk of the funding is likely to be channelled to just a few institutions. This would break a long-standing taboo in France, where the 83 previously centralized state universities have long been considered equal, at least in terms of government funding and researchers' pay scales.

The funding is part of a €35-billion package — the *grand emprunt*, or 'big loan' — announced by President Nicolas Sarkozy on 14 December, intended to boost the country's long-term competitiveness. Borrowed mainly from international financial markets, the investment represents a hefty 1.8% of France's annual gross domestic product, roughly equivalent in scale to the \$53-billion science stimulus package announced earlier this year by the United States (see *Nature* 461, 856–857; 2009).

Sarkozy's spending priorities (see graphic) broadly follow recommendations made on 17 November by a blue-ribbon panel of researchers, industrialists and economists, and chaired by two former prime ministers, conservative Alain Juppé and socialist

Michel Rocard. Panelist Edouard Bard, an oceanographer at the Paul-Cézanne University in Aix-Marseille, says he is pleased that Sarkozy heard the panel's argument that increasing the international competitiveness of France's universities was the *grand emprunt's* top priority. The funding should give universities the freedom and funding to attract talent from around the world by offering more competitive salaries and generous lab funding, he says.

Pillars of excellence

The stimulus funds will be used to create five to ten campuses of research excellence, each of which will receive an endowment of up to €1 billion. The scheme is partly modelled on Germany's multibillion-euro Excellence Initiative, says Bard (see *Nature* doi:10.1038/nature08269; 2009).

A further €1 billion was awarded, on top of €850 million allocated last year, to a project to transform the Saclay plateau just outside Paris — one of the highest concentrations of research infrastructure in Europe — into a supercampus by melding many institutions into a single body, fulfilling one of Sarkozy's campaign pledges from the 2007 presidential election (see *Nature*

446, 847–850; 2007). Other universities will, however, be eligible for other funding, including €1 billion to hire leading researchers or buy equipment to create 'labs of excellence'.

The windfall continues the reforms of a 2007 law that aimed to make universities more competitive by freeing them from central government control and allowing them to manage their own budgets, staff, salaries and buildings. It also reinforces Sarkozy's plan to shift research power away from the national research agencies and towards the universities, and follows the creation in 2007 of a national research council, which awards competitive grants on the basis of peer-reviewed proposals. Most labs had previously operated on a recurrent stream of government funding.

Yet French universities often lack the agencies' expertise in managing large research projects and funds, says

Philippe Froguel, a French geneticist working at Imperial College London. Most administrators of French universities, he says, are not in the same league as the heads of major US and UK universities. They will need to develop such expertise quickly if the universities are to spend the new funds well. Arnold Migus, director-general of France's CNRS, the largest national funding agency for basic research in Europe, notes that most university labs are joint CNRS labs, and that the agency is helping universities to get up to speed.

Some French researchers say that the new funds mask cuts in staff and research elsewhere. The "so-called massive investment" is a "mirage", says Bertrand Monthubert, spokesman for higher education and research of the opposition Socialist party, and a mathematician at Paul Sabatier University in Toulouse. He argues that the endowments' annual yields, which are vulnerable to the economic climate, would be similar to the annual budget rises that the universities normally receive.

Froguel applauds concentrating the funding on fewer players, but fears the money will flow only to the largest institutions. "Big is not always beautiful," he says. "It will totally ignore the pockets of excellence in smaller universities." He favours rewarding the best departments or research networks wherever they are, much as Britain's Research Assessment Exercise does (see page 834).

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SOURCE: PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC

