

A disappointing reform

French research requires a deeper reform with a vision — instead of limited organizational changes that do not provide a new competitive impulse to further develop research capabilities.

In July 2013, the French parliament voted by a small minority a new law related to Higher Education and Research (HER), brought by HER Minister Geneviève Fioraso. It followed a consultation¹ on what needed to be done in reforming the HER system, carried out in the summer of 2012. Among its key findings, it emerged that “too much of researchers’ time is dedicated to non-research tasks” and the necessity “to safeguard labs’ freedom to decide”. In other words, French research seems to suffer from modern bureaucratic illness and lacks some of the ingredients that could give scientists the ability to do more competitive research.

The new law is an archetype of a political compromise. Although it attempts to meet the needs of modern research, it seems to be damped down by the demands of a system inherited from the past². As a result, it has been criticized for failing to take into account enough of the practical recommendations from the consultation panel. Instead of harnessing these much needed changes, the new law only rubber stamps the larger reform undertaken by previous President Nicolas Sarkozy, which gave universities financial and operation autonomy.

The previous move left many universities in deep financial trouble, because this increased autonomy³, granted in 2007, was not accompanied by adequate resources necessary to hire experienced managers to run them. In recent times, any additional funding set aside for universities has been used to bridge the funding gap to operate the universities, and not to invest in new research.

Although it establishes a new national research strategy, in line with Europe Horizon 2020⁴, focusing on societal priorities such as health, climate change, energy, digital and innovative society, the new law completely lacks a vision on how this strategy will be achieved. Nor does it outline the tools and high-level orientations to make research competitive and ultimately give hope to French scientists that there is light at the end of the tunnel.

One amendment, for example, introduces a five year planning rule merely forcing the Ministry to produce a roadmap of resource allocations. It is not enough. Besides, a measure that is symptomatic of the lack of substance of the reform is the fact that the

national research evaluation agency (ANR) is now due to become an evaluation authority. It will therefore oversee procedures, rather than perform actual evaluations.

Although there is awareness since the consultation of the need to achieve greater competitiveness, no significant measures have been included in the law for it to happen. One of the recommendations of the consultation, for example, included a strong emphasis on the need to enhance transfer of research into innovative commercially viable solutions. Unfortunately, the new law ignores possible solutions recommended during the consultation. For example, developing further cooperation between public and private research. Or, replacing all external cooperation support agencies with a single streamlined agency to remove the red tape.

Instead, the law focuses on organizational and structural changes that are unlikely to have a major and immediate impact on the competitiveness of the country’s research.

Some of the changes stem from one of the consultation recommendations, which suggested bringing about change in university governance to increase democracy and collegiality in its decision-making process. To do so, the law creates an academic council overseeing implementation of both research and education decisions. Those strategic, budgetary and financial decisions are made by the universities board of trustees — mainly elected from among academic and non-academic staff and students — and the high-powered university President.

What is more, the consultation suggested collating higher education and research institutions under a regional umbrella. This recommendation was followed through the creation of 30 communities of universities and research establishments without dictating their actual form. This means that they could remain mere cooperation networks with no obligation to feature elected representatives.

Academic staff and researchers’ trade unions, among others, were critical of the low level of democracy in the management of universities and of the high level of power transferred to communities of universities. They argue this approach will be even less democratic than before. This means that there is no guarantee that enhancing competitiveness, even at regional level, will be on the agenda of these decision makers.



French Higher Education and Research Minister Geneviève Fioraso debating the law at the Senate in June 2013.

Unfortunately, the media coverage⁵ of the law has not addressed the details of in-depth reform that is needed. Instead, French language protection activists erupted into a rage about the proposal to allow some courses — around 1% — to be taught in English. This amendment, which was passed, is a positive step towards internationalization of French scientists. Many courses are already partly taught in English at postgraduate level in some universities and engineering schools so this is perhaps one of the few steps within the new law that may contribute to make French scientists more internationally competitive. As anticipated⁶ more drastic reforms may have to wait until the next election. □

References

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