



French research reforms (I)

Chance for Change?

According to those involved, earthquakes have been hitting French research and higher education over the last couple of years. Jeremy Garwood takes a good look at the ongoing struggle for reforms and presents his analysis in two parts. Part one explains the reason why everyone agrees that reform is needed and deals with the major points of the 2006 'Law On Research'.

Science or engineering? Money-makers or free thinkers? The schism at the heart of French public research reforms.

Starting in 2005, the French research system has been reeling from a series of governmental reforms that have introduced radical new changes to the organisation, funding, assessment and orientation of France's universities and public research institutions.

To lend weight to declarations affirming the importance of research and development to the nation's future, the French government has been promising to significantly increase funding to 3% of GDP by 2010 (a target set by the European Council's Lisbon Strategy in 2000).

However, although extra public money is forthcoming, there are new political strings attached. Furthermore, much of the new funding is going to industrial development rather than scientific research. To continue to obtain funding, research can no longer be open-ended: it must have short-term "finalised" aims and should demonstrate economic and industrial interest. The

recent creation of autonomous universities also seems to be linked to an inevitable disintegration of the existing research institutions, particularly the CNRS.

The schism in French higher education and the blurred image of French public research. A system in chronic need of reform.

An international observer might naively assume that in France, like in other industrialised countries, universities are the summit of the higher education system. Indeed, it can come as quite a shock when the truth sinks in: within France, the French universities are in fact considered to be inherently second rate when compared to the highly selective system of *grandes écoles* (professional schools) – a series of parallel elite "schools" of engineering, commerce, and administration.

While France's 85 universities struggle to educate almost 1.5 million students, 120 well-funded schools in the other more prestigious system teach barely a fifth that number.

Selection or no selection? All the "best" students are in the grandes écoles...

The only requirement for entry to a French university is the possession of a *baccalauréat (bac)*, the school leaving qualification. The numbers of school students passing the *bac* has steadily been increasing to over 70% of the age group (0.5 million students) with a pass rate of 86.9% in the *bac général* and 89.1% in the *bac scientifique*. 58% of successful *bac* students proceed into the university system, which, due to decades of inadequate funding, finds itself unable to cope with the annual influx of first year students. Lecture halls and amphitheatres are woefully overcrowded and universities are obliged to exercise radical surgery to drastically reduce student numbers to manageable proportions; first year failure rates are in excess of 50%. Although many students may try again or change subjects, the lack of direction and advice in the university system leaves hundreds of thousands of students with nothing to show for their time spent at the *fac* (the final dropout rate is a whopping 41%).