

Boost French research by increasing freedom for scientists and universities

The new French government should support education and research by improving budgets.

By Christine Musselin



In the run-up to the French election, many academics worried that a victory for the far-right National Rally party could result in cuts to research budgets and a weakening of cross-border collaboration owing to harsher immigration policies. Although the worst-case scenario for the higher-education sector has been staved off for now, the incoming government still has a lot to do.

Government funding of education and research, for instance, is below the country's national and international commitments. In 2000, France signed up to the European Commission's Lisbon Strategy, which had a goal of increasing investment in publicly funded research to 3% of gross domestic product (GDP) by 2010. But, with only 2.18% of GDP going towards research and development in 2022, France lags behind several other European Union members as well as countries such as the United States, Japan and China.



Having explored higher-education policy for much of my academic career, I have three recommendations for the new government.

First, increase funding for universities and research institutions – this is a top priority. Resources are dwindling: in the mid-1990s, the government spent 7.7% of GDP on education but, according to provisional data, only 6.8% in 2022. Worse, these numbers hide stark inequities, even in higher education: because students taking preparatory classes at public elite institutions (*grandes écoles*) benefit more than do those attending universities (€17,260 compared with €11,190, respectively, in 2022). This gap must be closed.

Last year, the French military was given a massive budget increase to €413 billion until 2030 – 40% more than it received in the previous six-year period. Higher education needs a similar boost.

A large increase in public spending would also make a modest hike in university tuition fees (up to €1,000 a year, for instance) more palatable. But such increases in tuition should avoid penalizing students who are already under-privileged, and should be accompanied by fellowships or student aid, not loans. Student fees are meant to supplement, not replace, public funding. Universities should commit to improving study conditions and student life for those with the highest risk of dropping out – the undergraduate community.



Second, give institutions a higher level of autonomy. Over the past decade or so, national attention and supplementary budgets have been directed towards a handful of research-intensive universities. As centres of excellence, nine institutions with a comprehensive research profile have been given a label of IdEx – including in Paris and Strasbourg. And eight that excel in a specific field have received an I-SITE label. For instance, the University of Pau and the Adour region focuses its resources and research on the energy and environmental transition. After a four-year probation period, if universities retain an IdEx or I-SITE label, they receive a regular grant.

But no public policy currently supports the development of most institutions, which are not classed as IdEx or I-SITE. Research is not the only mission of higher-education institutes: they also train knowledgeable citizens and contribute to a qualified workforce and locally to social, cultural and economic development. Each institution should be allowed to clarify its profile and set its own priorities and developmental plans. Those that are not oriented towards international research should not be deprived of funds.

This means that the ministry of higher education and research should modify the way in which it allocates its budgets. Rather than metric-based funding mechanisms that apply the same criteria to all institutions, and mostly allocate budgets annually, multi-year contracts based on the institution's chosen profile should be introduced. The financial gap between universities with an IdEx or I-SITE status and those without must be reduced.

Finally, France needs to redesign its national science policies. The government should focus less on what research to encourage and more on how to attract and retain researchers. This will foster an environment in which ideas can grow. Several national research programmes have been initiated in a top-down manner, often without providing much information about who made the decisions and on what basis. But this approach can overlook fundamental research, which can have unexpected yet important implications. Early work on messenger RNA, for example, wasn't a national priority in the 1990s, but was essential for vaccine design during the COVID-19 pandemic. More such efforts need to be encouraged by offering good working conditions and career progression in publicly funded research laboratories.

As a researcher who studies organizations, I might have been expected to suggest a redesign of the French education and research landscape. But I do not think that is what is required right now. The French system has already been through important structural reforms and at a fast pace, in recent years – including several mergers between universities, grandes écoles and research institutes, for instance. Now, institutions need stability. As stressed by the historian of firms Alfred Chandler, 'structure follows strategy'. Let's first concentrate on strategic issues that affect the whole system. Relevant structures, and results, will follow.

Nature 631, 711 (2024)

doi: https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-024-02382-w

Reprints and permissions

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares no competing interests.

Latest on:

Government Institutions Policy



Canada just hiked PhD and postdoc pay – here's how to get your country to do it, too

WORLD VIEW | 09 JUL 24



COVID tsar Patrick Vallance appointed UK science minister

NEWS | 08 JUL 24



Give UK science the overhaul it urgently needs

COMMENT | 04 JUL 24

nature careers

Jobs >

Research Engineer in Medical Device, Instrumentation and Mechatronics



Research Engineer in Medical Device, Instrumentation and Mechatronics, to undertake research in devices...

Suzhou, Jiangsu, China

Oxford Suzhou Centre for Advanced Research

Postdoctoral Associate

Houston, Texas (US)

Baylor College of Medicine (BCM)

Staff Scientist - Data Science/Machine Learning

Houston, Texas (US)

Baylor College of Medicine (BCM)

Postdoctoral Associate- Protein Crystallography

Houston, Texas (US)

Baylor College of Medicine (BCM)

Research Associate - Environmental Health

Houston, Texas (US)

Baylor College of Medicine (BCM)

Nature (Nature) | ISSN 1476-4687 (online) | ISSN 0028-0836 (print)

About Nature Portfolio

About us
Press releases
Press office
Contact us

Discover content

Journals A-Z
Articles by subject
protocols.io
Nature Index

Publishing policies

Nature portfolio policies
Open access

Author & Researcher services

Reprints & permissions
Research data
Language editing
Scientific editing
Nature Masterclasses
Research Solutions

Libraries & institutions

Librarian service & tools
Librarian portal
Open research
Recommend to library

Advertising & partnerships

Advertising
Partnerships & Services
Media kits
Branded content

Professional development

Nature Careers
Nature Conferences

Regional websites

Nature Africa
Nature China
Nature India
Nature Italy
Nature Japan
Nature Middle East