

Report said to seek more research in French universities

[PARIS] Research should be given a much greater role in French university courses, according to leaked details of a report being prepared for the government on the reform of universities and *grandes écoles*. The main changes suggested, reported in the newspaper *Libération*, include an ambitious reorganization of the French university degree structure to match that of other European countries. There are no suggestions of changes in the élite system of *grandes écoles* themselves.

The current two-year diploma of general universities studies would be extended by one year, and where appropriate would include professional and research training. A higher degree awarded after a further two years, equivalent in duration to the degrees now awarded by the *grandes écoles*, would similarly include six months of research – with a PhD being awarded after eight years of study.

Science minister moves on... after 20 years in job

[LONDON] Indonesia's minister for research and technology has moved to a new job after more than two decades in the post. B. J. Habibie has become his country's vice-president; his replacement, Rahardi Ramelan, was announced last week.

Habibie was an unusually powerful research minister thanks to his close links with President Suharto, a position that helped him to secure large sums of money for a number of ambitious technology projects.

Habibie's most notable achievement was to build a civil aircraft industry from scratch. But his bid to develop an indigenous high-technology base faltered when he had to relocate much of the industry to the United States to take advantage of lower costs of production.

Jospin pledges key role for basic research

[PARIS] The French prime minister, Lionel Jospin, has promised to put basic research at the centre of his government's programme. He warned last week that, although he wants to "bring the research world and economic spheres more closely together", he considers it "dangerous" for scientific research to be driven only by short-term economic and social demands.

Jospin was speaking at a reception in Paris organized by the Ecole Normale Supérieure and the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique to celebrate the award of the Nobel prize in physics last autumn to Claude

Cohen-Tannoudji. Jospin, who is due to announce a national research strategy next month, said research would remain a priority in the state budget.

Israel to boost numbers of high-tech graduates

[JERUSALEM] Israel's prime minister, Binyamin Netanyahu, has ordered a sharp increase in the numbers of graduates in high-technology disciplines. The move follows a meeting last week with industry leaders who urged him to double the number of professionals in high-technology industries and to double those industries' exports.

The government had planned to raise the annual output of such graduates from 2,000 to 4,000 by the year 2003. But Netanyahu said such an increase is insufficient and he has asked his officials to submit a revised plan next month. Israel already has 15,000 high-technology professionals, and its industry exports US\$7 billion worth of goods and services annually.

Stars rally to support biomedical agency

[WASHINGTON] Hollywood was again enlisted last week to advance the medical research cause, with actors Christopher Reeve and Mary Tyler Moore appearing at a rally on Capitol Hill. The actors, a dozen politicians and other supporters of the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) repeated a call to Congress to double the budget of the \$13.6 billion agency in the next five years.

Reeve, who was paralysed in a riding accident in 1995, said that the United States is at the point of being able to buy cures and therapies once thought impossible. "What if the money isn't there?" he asked. The Senate Budget Committee, which sets the limits within which funding committees must draft their spending bills, last week approved a 1999 budget that includes an 11 per cent boost in NIH funding, to \$15.1 billion.

First 'European PhDs' awarded in biotech

[MUNICH] The European Association for Higher Education in Biotechnology (HEduBT) has awarded its first certificates. The association, which was set up by a group of independent European scientists four years ago with the approval of the European Commission, last week credited two young scientists with 'European PhDs'. Both recipients had received their original PhDs at Swiss universities.

Those registering for HEduBT accreditation must already have a PhD from a European university. To win a European PhD, they must complete further courses, typically including patenting and ethics.

Asteroid watchers 'will talk first, go public later'

[WASHINGTON] Asteroid experts meeting last week in Houston, Texas, agreed to form a committee to review data on any future asteroid threat before going public with the news. The committee is intended to avoid the confusion that surrounded a research team's recent announcement of a possible asteroid collision with Earth in 2028. Within a day, other scientists were able to discount that possibility using archived data (see *Nature* 392, 215; 1998).

The committee is being created at the request of the US space agency NASA. Details on its membership and how it will operate have not been decided. But Donald Yeomans of NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California, says that the first step "is to make all data on near-Earth objects available to the small community of [people who compute asteroid orbits] almost immediately upon receipt so that we can all chew on it simultaneously".

Congressmen back plan to raise science spend

[WASHINGTON] The US House of Representatives Science Committee approves President Bill Clinton's plan to boost spending for research, but has quibbles about some of the details, says its annual "views and estimates" report released last week. Although it supports a 4 per cent increase for research next year, the committee said that projected research spending in subsequent years was inadequate. Republicans continue to disapprove of increases for the commerce department's Advanced Technology Program, and for environmental technology now included as part of Clinton's Climate Change Technology Initiative.

Academician delivers snub to Boris Yeltsin

[MOSCOW] Andrei Trofimuk, one of Russia's leading geologists and a co-founder of the Siberian branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, has rejected the offer of a government award for 'services to the country'. The award is accompanied by a lifetime income of more than 10 times Russia's minimum salary.

Trofimuk, an opponent of the policies of President Boris Yeltsin, said he could not accept an award from someone he blames for "destroying the Soviet Union and launching the present reforms, [which are] disastrous". But the 86-year-old academician is not short of honours. He received six Order of Lenin awards — the highest honour in the former Soviet Union — two Stalin prizes and the title 'Hero of the Soviet Union'.