Europe evaluates its four-year plans in biotechnology

London

An evaluation of the first two four-year programmes in biotechnology supported by the European Communities (EC) has concluded that the next programme, due to begin in 1990, should concentrate on fewer, larger projects.

While the first two programmes have been able to stimulate collaborations between laboratories in different EC countries, the size of the projects was often insufficient to attract industrial leading academic groups or the participation of industry.

The evaluation panel, chaired by Charlotte af Malborg, of the Swedish National Board for Technical Development, detected few signs that industry can be attracted to participate to a major extent in BRIDGE (Biotechnology Research for Industrial Development and Growth in Europe), the 100 million ECU (£67 million) successor to BEP (Biomolecular Engineering Programme), which ran until 1986, and BAP (Biotechnology Action Programme), which is in its last year.

While many projects in BEP and BAP have not been well defined nor worked on by a critical mass of scientists, there have been a number of successful projects, particularly in the genetics of plants and industrial microorganisms, according to the evaluators' report*.

Among the limited number of projects it recommends that BRIDGE tackles is the sequencing of the yeast genome, the construction of a detailed molecular genetic map of an economically important plant and animal, and a focused programme in protein engineering.

An annual budget of up to 0.5 million ECU should be devoted to the projects in BRIDGE to ensure that they attract high-quality participation, and the projects there should be a project manager in each case. These projects should consume 45 per cent of the budget of BRIDGE with another 25 per cent set aside for 'science-led' projects, for which proposals should be invited.

The training programmes financed in the past receive praise but need to be better marketed, says the report, particularly as they should be expanded in BRIDGE. But the evaluators believe that recipients are too generously supported, and that the level of payments should be reduced by 10 per cent to increase the travel budget.

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* *Evaluation of the Biomolecular Engineering Programme–BEP (1982–1986) and the Biotechnology Action Programme–BAP (1985–1989)*. EUR 11833, European Communities L-2985 Luxembourg. Price 11.25 ECU.

Socialist government designates research as priority for France

Paris

"Loosen up, adapt and modernize". This is research minister, Hubert Curien's message to the CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique), France's largest civil research employer, following the first ever cabinet meeting wholly dedicated to a national research organization last week. The 1989 budget gives the CNRS a long-awaited boost in terms of new jobs and money for equipment and running costs (see *Nature* **334**, 556; 1988). But, even if he broke the news gently, Curien made it clear that management reforms can no longer be avoided.

The CNRS, which employs over 10,000 researchers and 15,000 technicians and administrators, currently absorbs over 20 per cent of the national civil research budget. This means that any major change in government research policy will inevitably affect the functioning of CNRS. When the Chirac government sought to cut back on public spending, while increasing the role of the private sector in research, CNRS bore the brunt of the squeeze, especially in terms of net job losses and a remit to carry out more applied research (*Nature* **329**, 380; 1987). Now, it is the CNRS that benefits most from the new government's designation of research as a national priority.

Of the 919 new jobs created by Curien, 384 (284 researchers and 100 technicians) are earmarked for the CNRS. A further 427 posts will be changed as a result of regrading. By putting employment at the top of his list of priorities, Curien marks the government's diametric opposition to the previous administration's research strategy. Not only is there a return to a policy of annual recruitment (about 5 per cent per year), in order to offset the long-term effects of an unusually large number of middle-aged researchers. But Curien specifically wants to attract young people to research by raising doctoral grants to FF7000 (about $1,100) per month. Over 100 fellowships are also to be available to encourage foreign researchers to visit French laboratories.

Other good news for CNRS is a 23 per cent increase in money to buy semi-heavy equipment, and a 5.6 per cent increase in funds for laboratory running costs. But the nation's need to balance the books, to increase its technological competitivity and to respond to demands for greater regionalization mean that CNRS, too, must do some housekeeping.

Curien appeared to have some difficulty in putting this message across, while at the same time reassuring the CNRS committee that major reforms will not be called for. The problem is that both basic and applied research need to be stimulated, while there must be tighter control of the quality of research and the management of resources. "There can be no applied research without the vigorous development of fundamental research of international quality", says Curien. "The CNRS therefore has the responsibility to contribute by pushing back the frontiers of knowledge. But its work must also contribute to economic and social development."

In order to encourage better productivity, Curien has asked the director general of the CNRS, François Kourilsky, to draw up and instigate "modernization measures" by mid-1989. This, he explained, will involve regular auditing and the application of new procedures to evaluate research. Curien also wants to see CNRS draw up mid-term priorities and to identify the strengths and weaknesses of French research, with the inevitable consequence that some groups who are carrying out research whose "interest has diminished" will be wound up.

Curien has regained overall control of the national research budget and has taken measures to improve coordination with other ministries, notably industry and education. A consequence of this coordination is that university research, which depends heavily upon CNRS input, will also be scrutinized. Joint CNRS–university projects have, says Curien, reached saturation and need to be pruned, albeit a painful task. He hopes that groups whose grants are cut will nevertheless be able to create "research networks" in order to keep abreast of developments. At the same time, he wants to see more researchers involved in university teaching – vocations which are largely separate.

Having stressed that the prime function of CNRS is to carry out basic research of international quality, Curien has called for "openness to the economic world". This means greater collaboration with engineering academies, which have often snubbed CNRS, and the continued development of contractual work with large companies and small businesses.

As a microcosm of the nation's research strategy, the "do everything better" message addressed to the CNRS signals that the government has sought primarily to reverse measures set up by its predecessors, leaving a definite orientation of policy, particularly regarding technology transfer, to next year.

François Kourilsky, who was appointed in July, seems to have been handed a Chinese puzzle which he is so far unable to solve. This may explain why he has remained silent, even during last week's press conference.

Peter Coles