

## Spanish universities

## Reforms beginning to work

## Barcelona

SPANISH universities are in a state of upheaval. The effects of last year's Law for University Reform are making necessary important changes in the structure of universities, affecting in particular the teaching staff, the number of departments, the statutes of the universities and their control.

Just before the end of the academic year, steps were taken to reduce the number of professors under contract and to give some of them tenure (see *Nature* 308, 395; 1984). Commissions were appointed for each discipline, which then decided who qualified for permanent positions. The results now published show that around 6,000 out of 8,000 candidates qualified, a proportion that the Ministry of Education believes accurately reflects the situation.

## Mount Wilson Inc.

## Washington

A CALIFORNIA industrialist has formed a corporation to take over the Mount Wilson observatory. The present owner of Mount Wilson, the Carnegie Institution of Washington, which also operates the Las Campanas observatory in Chile, announced this summer (see *Nature* 15 August, p.88) that it can no longer afford to keep both sites and will shut down Mount Wilson on 1 July 1985 unless a new owner can be found.

The new corporation, called the Mount Wilson Research Corporation, was founded by George Roberts, who made his fortune designing and manufacturing aircraft lavatories. His company, INCA Corporation, also made the zero-gravity lavatory for the space shuttle.

The corporation has no funds as yet, but hopes to raise an endowment of several million dollars, earnings on which will provide the basic annual operating costs of the observatory. Foundations and individuals are being approached for contributions.

According to Dr Arthur Vaughan, one of several research astronomers associated with Mount Wilson who are involved in Roberts's effort, the corporation is talking to universities and organizations such as the Smithsonian Institution and the Jet Propulsion Laboratory about entering into a consortium.

Vaughan said that the aim is both to maintain an in-house research staff at Mount Wilson and to serve the needs of outside researchers. To that end, all principal investigators would be involved in managing the use of the facility. The board of directors is to be made up of non-astronomers who will be concerned largely with the financial health of the corporation.

Stephen Budiansky

The results varied considerably between the different commissions, and although there was no obvious difference in the quality of the candidates, acceptance rates varied between around 50 per cent and more than 80 per cent. Those not selected are preparing to do political and legal battle. There will be more positions next year, and the situation of university professors will have changed profoundly in a period of only two years. Some people fear the long-term effects, particularly because the number of students is beginning to decrease and there is a danger of saturation of university positions soon.

The statutes of universities will have to be adapted to the new regulations. All universities have been asked to make proposals, and these will have to be approved by the government. The body in charge of this task is the General Assembly (Claustro) which includes professors, students and administrative staff. In some universities, conflicts have arisen between diverging interests.

An important change in the structure of universities, which will be reflected in the new statutes, is the definition of university departments. There is widespread agreement that the present departments are too small and too numerous, having mostly been built around a single professor. It is hoped that the new regulation will stimulate the concentration of people, administration and equipment in order to build up more efficient structures.

From now on, departments should have a minimum number of professors (twelve in the latest version of the law), and a full-time professor as the head of department. Normally, there should be only one department in any subject in a single university. The names of the departments should in principle correspond to areas of knowledge defined by the ministry. In some cases, these regulations may cause problems, for instance in medicine and engineering faculties where many departments have mostly part-time professors or in departments where the members are physically separated or working in very different research subjects. In any case, the power of full professors ("Catedráticos") will probably be diluted in these bigger departments.

The most important change is that the national government is transferring control of the universities to the autonomous governments of the different regions of Spain. Agreement to hand over the universities to the Government of Catalonia has already been reached. But strong differences still exist about the amount of money to be transferred and, as a consequence, the process is at a standstill. The government hopes that this period of upheaval will result in more dynamic universities.

Pedro Puigdomènech

## Star wars killings?

## Washington

ALTHOUGH almost all of the \$1,300 million budgeted this year for the Strategic Defense Initiative (star wars) is committed to research projects that have been under way for some time, defence contractors are already sensing a kill. "The Department of Defense has budgeted \$24 billion over the next five years for the Strategic Defense Initiative", reads an announcement from the American Society of Mechanical Engineers (ASME). "Will you find a place in this state-of-the-art cornucopia — expected to be a greater undertaking than the Apollo program?" To help them out, ASME is sponsoring a day-long seminar in Washington in mid-November, featuring briefings from key defence officials to show "how to get in on the ground floor". The admission fee is \$245 a head.

The only new funds to come out of the star wars programme so far are \$6 million to be awarded for an initial "creative effort to develop methodologies for defining alternate architectures". Proposals are due by 1 November; it is expected that more than one contractor will be chosen. The winners will be asked to "develop the strategic defense mission", considering both "treaty constrained and unconstrained threats", and to study various "candidate" anti-ballistic missile technologies.

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## Balzan prizes



PROFESSOR Jan Hendrik Oort of Leiden University in The Netherlands (above) has won this year's Italian Balzan Prize for astrophysics. The genetics prize has been awarded to Sewall Wright (95), professor emeritus in the Universities of Chicago and Wisconsin. The winner of the prize for history and criticism of the literatures is Professor Jean Starobinski of the University of Geneva.

Each of the winners will receive 250,000 Swiss francs. In 1985, the three prizes will be awarded for mathematics, palaeontology and history of occidental art. □