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Autor: Crivelli, Pablo
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More money for research

To kick-start the economy again, we need to invest in our single most important resource: grey matter. The government will need to spend around CHF 17 billion on education and research during the 2004–2007 period.

THIS WAS THE DECISION reached by the National Council at its special session from 5 to 8 May on the law on education, research and technology.

For once the centre-right and the left were in agreement. To maintain its high standard of living, Switzerland will need to spend more on education and research and guarantee a high-quality education system for the next generation. This is the only way that young Swiss can compete effectively against their European contemporaries on the job market.

During the debate various members of parliament pointed to the fact that investment in brainpower had stagnated over the last ten years despite an exponential growth in student numbers; some universities were full to bursting, as a result of which the quality of education was suffering. Some National Councillors also reminded members that several high-profile research projects submitted to the Swiss National Science Foundation had to be rejected due to lack of funds, forcing a number of scientists to seek positions abroad. In their opinion this represented a loss of human capital which could have negative implications for Switzerland in the near future. Minister of Home Affairs Pascal Couchepin pointed out that the lack of innovation was jeopardising future economic development.

While all the parties agreed to earmark more funds for education and research, opinions were divided on the problem of financing such a step. In November 2002 the Federal Council decided to increase the research budget by six percent (compared with the 2000–2003 period) to CHF 17.3 bil-

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Switzerland is to be promoted as a centre of academic excellence. Picture: young people in the Technorama, Winterthur.


lion. But sinking federal finances have forced it to trim this increase to five percent (CHF 480 million less) in a first step and four percent in a second step. So the original CHF 17.3 billion allocated for research would drop to CHF 16.5 billion. The government is aiming to cut costs by CHF 3.5 billion by 2006, to reduce the federal deficit which has been exacerbated by lower tax revenues as a result of the economic slump. All areas will be affected, stressed Minister of Finance Kaspar Villiger at a presentation of the Federal Council's thrift package on 30 April.

Delaying the inevitable?

While the Swiss People's Party (SVP) called for a mere four percent increase in the research budget, the majority of representatives regarded this as unacceptable. In the opinion of the Liberal Democrats (FDP), Christian Democrats (CVP) and Social Democrats (SP), four percent was too little, and

research and education could not wait any longer for higher contributions from the state. In view of the lamentable state of federal finances, the FDP and CVP were prepared to compromise on a five percent increase in the four-year budget. The SP for its part rejected any notion of cutbacks in an area of central national importance and called for research and education to be excluded from the tax savings package scheduled for debate in the June parliamentary session. An SP motion to this effect was approved by a majority of 80 to 76. A motion to increase the credit by five percent was also approved.

The final decision will be made in June, but it is hard to believe that this area will be completely spared from the knife.

Pablo Crivelli 

Translated from German.