



NEWS HIGHLIGHTS

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Budget cuts hit Spanish science

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Cuts aimed at reducing Spain's budget deficit from 11 per cent to 6 per cent of GDP by 2011 have hit science funding, with one estimate saying spending on R&D as a whole will fall by 8.37 per cent in 2011, compared to 2010.



The austerity measures announced this week translate into a 1.65 per cent cut in the budget of the Science and Innovation Ministry (MICINN). When R&D loans for companies are excluded from this, the cut in direct funding for scientific programmes and grants goes up to 4 per cent.

But all ministries are facing severe cuts, ranging from 8.2 per cent in health, to 30 per cent in public works. Since many ministries also fund R&D activities, Spain's R&D expenditure will see an 8.37 per cent drop, according an analysis by the Confederation of Spanish Scientific Societies (Confederación de Sociedades Científicas Españolas -COSCE).

And Spanish scientists complain there is an even bigger problem than this sharp drop in public spending, which is a weak and inflexible science structure that offers no incentives to scientists to increase their productivity.

Science has low visibility

"The draft budget does the only thing it can do under the current circumstances, which is to reduce deficit, but it could be more ambitious, it should bet more for science and education. But this sort of investment doesn't get high political visibility compared to investing in physical infrastructure, such as high velocity trains," says Germà Bel, professor of economic policy at Barcelona University.

And the cuts for science arrive at a bad moment, he says, because they add to the cuts that the Spanish scientific system suffered last year, when MICINN was cut by 15 per cent.

These austerity measures mean scientists in Spain are starting to see the future of the country's science as uncertain. "Prospects are not too encouraging for 2011. We won't be hiring new group leaders because we can't guarantee their salary payments and the working conditions of their groups," says Luis Serrano, researcher at the Centre for Genomic Regulation (Centre de Regulació Genòmica - CRG) in Barcelona, and head of the Systems Biology programme that CRG is running with the European Biology Molecular Laboratory (EMBL).

"Freezing positions will delay the development of the CRG, but more importantly could affect the confidence gained internationally of Spain as an interesting place to do cutting-edge science," says Serrano.

The CRG is one of the flagship research institutes in Spain that, together with other centres, such as the National Cancer Research Centre (Centro Nacional de Investigaciones Oncológicas - CNIO) in Madrid, were set up in the late 90s and are managed through autonomous public foundations.

These centres have proved to be far more scientifically productive than their older counterparts. Many Spanish scientists think that one the ways to remove the rigidities in the country's science structure would be to increase their number. They argue the centres offer greater flexibility and autonomy in allocating resources than public research centres that are dependent on MICINN, like the Spanish National Research Council (Centro Superior de Investigaciones Científicas CSIC), which is often stifled by excessive red-tape. Also, unlike older centres, they don't employ civil servants.

At the CRG, the budget coming from non-competitive sources accounts for 47 per cent of its total income. The Spanish government's overall contribution is very small, at only 5 per cent. It decreased by 30 per cent in 2010. But, at the moment, the CRG is living in an uncertain situation, trying to hold onto €4.5 million that the local Catalan government economics department wants to claw back.

"We don't know what it will happen in the end, if we'll have to return this amount, or if it will be cut from next year's budget," says Serrano, who was hired by the CRG as part of the Catalan Institute for Research and Advanced Studies (ICREA) programme, which is designed to attract talented scientists by offering them a tenure-track career.

The ICREA programme, 100 per cent funded by the Catalan Government, has kept its entire budget this year and next year, and will have created twenty new openings every year since its inception in 2000, according to Angel Pina, ICREA's financial manager.

CSIC under strain again

As last year, CSIC centres have taken the worst hit in this year's draft budget, with an overall cut of 5.37 per cent. Rafael Rodrigo, astrophysicist and CSIC president, last week told a Parliamentary committee for science and innovation that 20 per cent of new positions will be cancelled next year. Staff expenses will go down by 9 per cent, due to a 5 per cent cut in salary across board for all public sector employees in Spain. The biggest hit at CSIC will be in infrastructure spending, which will go down by 31.1 per cent, Rodrigo said.

For now, the smaller cut in the 2011 budget of the Science Ministry means there will be minimal impact on grants and scientific programmes according to Science Minister Cristina Garmendia. She has said that, taking into account the Spanish government's current austerity measures, the draft budget guarantees the continuity of scientific programmes, and she expects the final budget could equal that of last year, following a parliamentary debate on the budget.

"We are now in a 'war economy'," says Jose Mari Valpuesta, director of CSIC's National Centre for Biotechnology (Centro Nacional de Biotecnología - CNB) in Madrid. "Scientists will get ahead as always with strong will and hard work." But high spirits won't buy the machines that Valpuesta says the centre needs.

The hiring prospects for next year are not so good either, he says. However, it is very likely that CSIC's budgets for hiring PhD students, postdocs and technicians won't be reduced.

Part two of this two part series, appearing next week, will consider the need for changes to the structure of science in Spain.

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