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News

Spanish science spending lockdown

Young researchers and new projects will take brunt of cuts.

Lucas Laursen

Acoustic physicist Luis Gómez Ullate is having a hard time finding a job. Gómez, a tenured investigator with Spain's national research council (CSIC) in Madrid, isn't looking for himself — he's helping out one of his graduate students facing the country's increasingly difficult science labour market. "The options are tighter than usual," he says.

Spain's research institutions, which got a reprieve from major budget cuts last year, are tightening their belts in anticipation of flat or trimmed budgets over the next couple of years. Cristina Garmendia, Spain's science and innovation minister, told the newspaper *El País* on 22 June that research funding will be "frozen or minimally reduced" as a result of government-wide austerity measures, but said that overall funding levels would remain unknown for at least a few weeks.

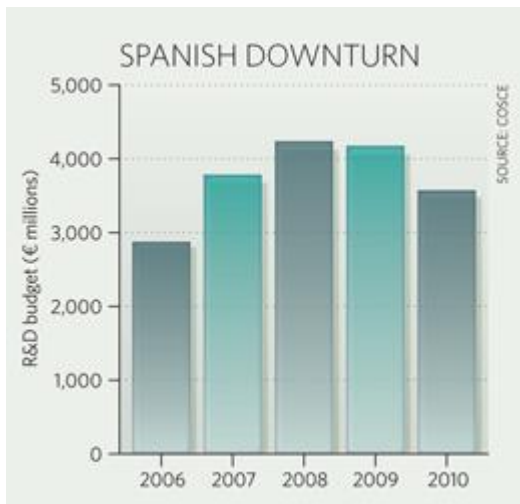
The central government's more detailed budget proposal will not be published until November or December of this year. In the meantime, CSIC has prepared three-year plans for various funding scenarios. "We will try to maintain an international standard of research," says CSIC president Rafael Rodrigo Montero. "But starting in 2011 we can no longer protect the entire training budget" devoted to graduate students, technicians, tech transfer officers, and postdocs. Training cuts could exceed 20%, Rodrigo Montero warned.

Around half of CSIC's 7,000 researchers are civil servants who last month were subject to an unprecedented government-wide salary cut of at least 5%. The others are on temporary contracts. CSIC will not be renewing any research contracts or hiring new staff in 2011 or 2012, although that may change in 2013 when it predicts a small budget increase, says Rodrigo Montero. Researchers at CSIC may hire help using cash from non-government sources, such as industry, private foundations or the European Union. For example, Rodrigo Montero expects them to pick up additional funds from the European Seventh Framework programme, which is scheduled to ramp up over the next three years.



Cristina Garmendia, Spain's science minister, has warned that research funding may be frozen next year.

EPA / Photoshot



Spain's R&D budget may be in decline.

He explains that CSIC has already cut collaborations in which it is not the lead partner, supplementary funding to host academic conferences, and start-up packages for newly tenured researchers. However, as the central government only approved 20 new tenured researchers out of the 200 requested by CSIC this year, he was able to use discretionary funds to cover their start-up packages.

Gómez says that budget cuts will hit young scientists — such as his graduate student — disproportionately: "A 10% cut when you can't fire civil servants means you cut more than 10% of new opportunities."

Construction of new infrastructure, such as labs and scientific facilities, has also been postponed according to Rodrigo Montero, but existing construction projects remain funded.

Boom and bust

Spanish science funding has seen double-digit growth under the current government, creating relatively attractive conditions for talent from Spain and abroad — a third of last year's prestigious Ramón y Cajal postdoctoral fellows were foreigners. The visibility of Spanish research, as measured by articles published in prominent research journals, has also grown. "The important thing is to keep sending the message that Spain is a good place to do research and a country which is betting on talent," says biochemist Joan Guinovart, president of the Confederation of Spanish Scientific Societies (COSCE) and a biochemist at the Institute for Research in Biomedicine in Barcelona.

Guinovart says that budget cuts at the Ministry of Science and Innovation (MICINN) will not be felt directly throughout the entire Spanish research community. Other institutions, including universities and some research centres, are funded by regional governments which make decisions independently of the ministry. Some institutions may also apply budget savings from the current year as a cushion towards next year's budget.

Nevertheless, a COSCE data-mining study released in March, before the present austerity planning, estimated that Spain's 2010 research funding levels would fall below 2007 funding levels.

It is possible to look at the recession as a time to forge stronger research practices, says Guinovart. "The crisis forced financial reform and labour reform, maybe next what we need is reform of knowledge production," he says. A draft science law is under consideration by parliament, and although it should improve the movement of Spanish scientists between research centres, it leaves unchanged many unpopular labour practices. These include the



Joan Guinovart.

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hiring of many early-career scientists with grants instead of full employment contracts so they do not receive social security benefits and using tenured civil-service places for more senior scientists, meaning that unproductive researchers cannot be fired. But adding to the confusion, Spanish president José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero has floated the idea of reorganizing his government's ministries, which may include the MICINN, established just two years ago.

Goméz, who is nearing retirement, is optimistic for his graduate student. "We've been through dark times before," he says, "and the biggest change by far in Spanish science has been the new people, with more training, more ability. The young people are fundamental."

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The Spanish central government have just approved (July 5th) 26 new CSIC tenured researchers this year 2010. In 2008, it was 250. An about 90% reduction in two years. And now the minister says that probably the budget will be frozen next year... no comments. #11698

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Posted by: **Antonio Mas** | 2010-07-06 10:04:20 AM

One of the most famous cancer research institutes in Spain, the CNIO, is actually cutting 5% off the salary of ALL EMPLOYEES, including those with temporary contracts and most strikingly including those who receive grants from outside Spain or from private institutions. #11701

Indeed, researchers are not supported at all, not even by those who should give them full support. We work hard for CNIO to be a centre of excellence, and this is what we get from CNIO? You're welcome!

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Posted by: **paola martinelli** | 2010-07-06 11:50:56 AM

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