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Funding uncertainty strands Spain's young scientists

Delayed decisions disrupt international collaborations.

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MADRID

Spanish researchers are feeling the budget squeeze — until now restricted to creditors of Spain's regional governments — as the country scrambles to negotiate a 2012 budget.

Last November, Diego de la Fuente, a graduate student in astronomy at the National Aerospace Technical Institute in Madrid, made a bet. He would gamble travel costs and two months' living expenses of his own money to visit the United States in March and April this year to work with astronomer Donald F. Figer at the Rochester Institute of Technology in New York. At the time, the bet seemed a safe one: de la Fuente's name was on a provisional list of mobility-grant winners under the Research Personnel Training programme run by the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness.

By the first week of January neither de la Fuente nor any of the roughly 1,200 other provisional winners had received confirmation of their grants, according to Pilar Navas-Parejo, a graduate student in geology at the University of Granada and a spokeswoman for the Federation of Young Investigators (FJI)/Precarios advocacy group. Provisional winners of the previous year had their funding confirmed by the end of December — although payments typically arrived later.

Worse, de la Fuente's January paycheck, managed by the National Research Council, another central-government agency, was nowhere to be found. "At that time I had to ask for money urgently from my family," he recalls.

De la Fuente says that his supervisor in Madrid suggested he delay the trip by ten days to wait for the ministry to confirm the travel grant, but by then he had already booked his US work permit, airline tickets and housing. Other young researchers filled the FJI/Precarios online forum with similar complaints. Some chose to delay travel; others have cancelled it altogether.

Clear as mud

Since late December the ministry has answered queries about the delayed grant confirmations by referring to a regulation that declares the provisional mobility grants null if they are still unconfirmed six months after the application deadline. That would be 15 March 2012. Yet today



The Spanish government has left many young researchers waiting months for their grant money to be paid out.

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Luis Ordóñez Jiménez, of the ministry's secretariat for research, development and innovation, told *Nature* that another rule, issued on 21 July 2011, extended the decision period to nine months. The emails referring to a decision by 15 March were "in error," Ordóñez says, and that while the ministry hopes to announce its final funding decision as soon as possible, it has until more than halfway through 2012 to do so. His advice for funding candidates is to "postpone as much as possible" their travel.

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De la Fuente's January paycheck arrived with the February payment, days before his flight to the United States. "I was afraid that they would continue not paying my salary, which would have impeded my going even with my own money," he says.

Neither de la Fuente nor any of the several other young scientists who contacted *Nature* have told their international collaborators about the funding uncertainty. "It embarrasses me to tell them because I don't think that outside Spain this happens," says Alba González Usano, a graduate student in neuroscience at the Prince Felipe Research Centre in Valencia who won a provisional grant to study at the University of Cambridge this year.

Another type of training grant, the predoctoral University Faculty Training grant, has also been delayed, says Juan de la Figuera, outgoing president of the Association for the Advancement of Science and Technology in Spain (AACTE). Under pressure from the Spanish press last week, the Ministry of Education said it would renew those grants for 107 doctoral candidates who had been waiting since the end of last year to collect their money, but it gave no word on what would happen with the next round of funding, which affects around 950 researchers. Yesterday the AACTE, FJI/Precarios and several other Spanish research groups sent the government an open letter decrying Spain's research funding cuts and opaque communication with scientists.

All this uncertainty may be realistic training for Spain's young scientists, however — senior researchers are also facing disruptions to their funding. De la Figuera notes that the latest national basic research call included a new phrase: "the payment of [annual installments] after the first will be conditional on budgetary availability."

"The normal thing if you're collaborating is to tell your colleagues when you can travel and how you can participate in the project," he says, "but now we don't know."

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