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News

Austerity measures sap Spanish science

But science minister defends draft budget.

Michele Catanzaro

Scientists in Spain have expressed concern about the scale of spending cuts outlined in the country's draft 2011 science budget.

The government delivered its proposed budget for 2011 to Spain's Congress on 30 September. On Tuesday, science minister Cristina Garmendia defended her ministry's budget in a press conference, suggesting that it was similar to last year.

But overall government expenditure in research and development (R&D) is set to drop by 8.37% next year compared with the 2010 budget, according to an analysis released on Monday by the Confederation of Spanish Scientific Societies (COSCE).

"The building of a highway can be stopped for two years, but if we cut science, it will be much more difficult to make up the lost ground," says José Molero, an economist at the Complutense University of Madrid and the coordinator of the COSCE study.

But Garmendia argued that if the government had applied its austerity plan evenly across all ministries, her budget would have been cut by 11%. "Resources available to R&D have more than doubled since 2004", she said.

Her comments have not assuaged critics, however. "We acknowledge the effort to reduce damage to science," says Molero. "But investment in R&D was supposed to be the main driver for leading Spain out of the current crisis."

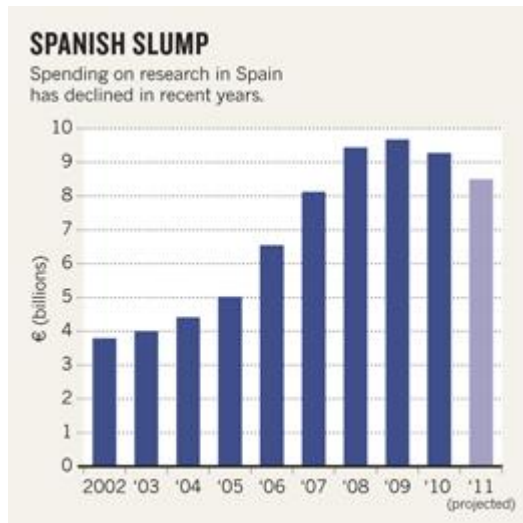
Frozen or cut?

The science and innovation ministry's draft budget includes a 1.65% cut in



Science minister Cristina Garmendia maintains that the 2011 draft budget protects research. *Andrea Comas/REUTERS*

2011 compared with that approved by Congress in 2010, Garmendia said. But she added that the final budget would probably be no different from last year — or even a little larger, because Congress, which is expected to approve the budget in December, usually increases it a little.



Government R&D loans to companies will be frozen. The budget lines for projects, fellowships and contracts are likely to be the least affected — although funding for grants is cut by 5.78% in the draft budget. Research institutions funded by the central government, such as the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC), face a 6.71% cut overall, although the CSIC itself will receive a 5.67% cut. But, according to the ministry, this will be mainly absorbed by a salary reduction of 5%, which was applied in June this year, and by savings in

institutional running costs.

The COSCE report, however, paints a much bleaker picture. Its study is based on the analysis of the overall budget devoted to R&D by the central government, including research funds at the ministries of industry, health, defence and education. Taken together, research funding across all ministries drops by 8.37% in the proposed budget. Military research is hit particularly hard — as it has been in recent years — with an 17.6% cut. "The overall drop comes on top of last year's 5% cut. We can endure one year, but two may be too much," says Molero.

Losing talent

Although the central government is responsible for about a fifth of R&D spending in Spain — with the private sector and regional governments funding much of the rest — its decisions usually reflect broader science-funding trends.

The austerity measures are already having an effect on career prospects. "If we end up with less money for projects, fewer people will have contracts," warns Salomón Aguado, spokesman for Spain's Federation of Young Researchers. Yesterday, CSIC president Rafael Rodrigo admitted that the budget cuts will result in a roughly 20% drop in the number of non-permanent positions offered at the institution.

Scientists in the Ramón y Cajal programme are also likely to be affected. This

five-year tenure track programme was launched in 2001 to help to reverse the brain drain of young scientists out of Spain, and more than 1,000 people are enrolled. But figures last month from the National Association of Ramón y Cajal Researchers (ANIRC) showed that between 14% and 33% of scientists finishing the scheme in 2009 did not obtain permanent posts, due to the hiring slow-down introduced as part of the austerity measures of the past two years — measures that are set to continue.

The Spanish Astronomical Society sent a letter to Garmendia last week, citing concerns about the situation of Ramón y Cajal scientists in the field. The letter warned that many years of effort to promote research could be wasted by a change that results in a relatively small saving in the global budget of the country. "If we don't fulfil our promises, the elite of European research will not trust us anymore," says Emilio Alfaro Navarro, the society's director.

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