

# Fears grow over Australian science funding

Researchers braced for budget cuts.

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Tensions are mounting between Australian scientists and the federal government amid fears that science will be hit hard in the federal budget, due on 14 May.

The minority Labor government, which has the support of the Australian Greens and some independents, has already announced cuts to science funding, and some fear that there could be further assaults in a budget that is expected to be tight. Policy experts are worried that institutions such as the Australian Research Council, which funds most university research, and government science agencies, including the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation, will be affected.

In the budget for the 2012–13 financial year, the government allocated around Aus\$8.9 billion (US\$9.1 billion) to science, research and innovation across all sectors, including higher education, government science agencies and health and rural research. Actual spending in the 2011–12 financial year was around Aus\$9.3 billion.

Going forward, Prime Minister Julia Gillard is determined to fund two big-ticket items in the budget — a school-reform programme and a national disability insurance scheme, which, together with an expected Aus\$17 billion shortfall in revenue, could result in additional pressure to find other places to cut. Gillard has said that every reasonable option would be “on the table”.

The outlook for science funding already looked grim last October, when the government announced that it would delay some planned funding increases. Concern increased on 13 April, when Craig Emerson, minister for tertiary education, skills, science and research, announced a Aus\$2.3-billion cut to university and student-support funding, causing an unusual furore from academics and organisations representing universities.

Michael Gallagher, executive director of the Group of Eight, which represents Australia’s research-intensive universities, says that the universities are considering cuts to research programmes and the streamlining of administrative processes. As a last resort, they would consider shedding technical and administrative staff.

Policy experts say that the science community lacks an advocate in the cabinet — a group that includes only the government’s senior ministers — who is experienced in the science and research portfolios. Emerson was given the portfolios in a reshuffle on 25 March, bringing to three the number of [senior science and research ministers](#) appointed in less than 16 months.

Bob Williamson, science policy secretary of the Australian Academy of Science, points out that the government’s failure to protect the research budget contrasts with the stance taken by the United States and much of Europe. “The academy sees the research budget as an investment, not a cost,” he adds.

## Access concerns

Meanwhile, scientists are worried about delays to a long-term funding plan for operating hundreds of millions of dollars’ worth of scientific infrastructure — used in fields ranging from climatology to biodiversity conservation — and for guaranteeing access to international facilities.

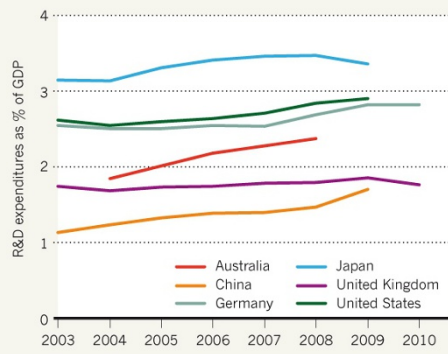
They say the delays are threatening Australian infrastructure, including the Australian Plasma Fusion Research Facility at the Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra. In the absence of federal funding, the ANU has picked up the tab to keep the facility running for a further 18 months, but the long-term outlook is uncertain.



DAVE HUNT/AAP/Press Association Images

Fears abound that Prime Minister Julia Gillard (right) is giving science funding lower priority than other government programmes, including a national disability insurance scheme.

### R&D EXPENDITURES OF SELECTED COUNTRIES



Source: World Bank

world's largest optical telescopes, such as the Gemini telescopes in Hawaii and Chile and the Magellan telescopes, also in Chile. "These are the pillars of optical astronomy which we need to access in order to maintain our world leading position in this field," says Matthew Colless, director of the ANU's Research School of Astronomy and Astrophysics.

Scientists are also concerned about the Australian Research Council's Future Fellowships scheme, which is designed to stem the country's brain drain by supporting top mid-career researchers and which is due to end this year.

"Australian science has actually been doing well," says Alan Finkel, president of the Australian Academy of Technological Sciences and Engineering and chancellor of Monash University in Melbourne (see graph above). "We have a good science base

and we need to maintain that. Cutting that base would have a long-term, devastating impact."

A spokesman for Emerson says that the minister will "not comment on what may or may not be in the budget". He goes on to say that the government "recognizes that science and research are central to boosting Australia's productivity, competitiveness and prosperity. That's why it has invested record amounts in science, research and Australian universities since coming to government in 2007."

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