

# Australian budget spares research from further blow

But response from science advocates is lukewarm.

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After deep funding cuts for science announced earlier this year, the Australian research community was relieved to dodge further reductions in Tuesday's federal budget.

Policy experts welcomed the government's decision to continue a successful fellowship scheme and resurrect a programme for funding scientific facilities that had ended. However, they say that the budget lacks foresight.

The government has yet to calculate the final tally for all the research-related items in its budget, according to a departmental spokesperson. So it is unclear yet whether total funding levels for 2013–14 will be higher or lower than those for 2012–13.

Science and Technology Australia, a professional-interests group in Canberra that represents 68,000 scientists and technologists, said in a statement that the budget “holds little for science and technology — with a reprieve for mid-career fellowships and critical infrastructure funding — but scant long-term vision”.

The Australian Academy of Science agrees. “While the academy welcomes short-term investments in researchers and research infrastructure, this budget unfortunately represents a missed opportunity to support a strategic long-term vision for Australia's future,” academy president Suzanne Cory said in a statement.

The science community had steeled itself for a new blow after the government's announcement on 13 April of a Aus\$2.3-billion (US\$2.27-billion) cut to some university research, teaching and learning grants and student-support schemes. The cuts came after the government's decision last October to delay planned increases to the Sustainable Research Excellence scheme, which covers part of the indirect costs of university research, such as maintenance and technical support.

## Budget shortfall

The Labor party, which holds a minority government with the support of the Australian Greens and some independents, revealed last week that national revenue had been Aus\$17 billion lower than expected in the 2012–13 financial year. But the government reaffirmed its commitment to major initiatives — a school reform programme and a national disability-insurance scheme.

With a federal election looming in September, the government had been under pressure to put the budget on the road to a future surplus. On Tuesday, the government reported that the deficit in 2013–14 will be Aus\$18 billion, down from Aus\$19.4 billion in 2012–13, with the budget expected to return to balance in 2015–16 and to surplus in 2016–17.

In the budget, the government resurrected the National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Strategy, allocating Aus\$185.9 million over two years to keep vital research facilities running. Scientists had [worried about the fate of infrastructure](#) worth hundreds of millions of dollars, such as the Australian Plasma Fusion Research Facility at the Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra.

The government also laid out a little more than Aus\$135 million over five years to extend the Australian Research Council's Future Fellowships scheme, a programme to attract and retain outstanding mid-career researchers. It had been due to end this year, but the government will now award an extra 150 fellowships.

Catriona Jackson, chief executive of Science and Technology Australia, called for a longer-term plan for the fellowships scheme, to “keep the nation's outstanding mid-career researchers living and working in Australia”.



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Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard watched on Tuesday as treasurer Wayne Swan presented a budget that spared research from deeper cuts.

Other new spending includes a Aus\$30.9-million boost over four years for the Australian Institute of Marine Science, and Aus\$8.1 million for the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation to boost the capacity of its research reactor, the country's only nuclear reactor.

A spokesman for Craig Emerson, the minister for tertiary education, skills, science and research, says the timing of the new funding for infrastructure allows future investment decisions to take into account strategic research priorities being developed under the leadership of chief scientist Ian Chubb.

"At the same time, currently-funded facilities will be evaluated to ensure they are providing value for money, and are being delivered in the most effective way to support Australian researchers," he says.

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