

SEVEN DAYS

The news in brief

TECHNOLOGY

AI investment

France will invest €1.5 billion (US\$1.8 billion) in artificial-intelligence (AI) research and innovation by 2022, as part of a national strategy unveiled by French President Emmanuel Macron at a conference in Paris on 29 March. INRIA, France's national computer-science agency, will coordinate the plan with other French research agencies and universities. The strategy aims to create networks of AI research institutes in four or five places across the country. At the conference, Google's London-based AI firm DeepMind also announced that it will establish a centre in Paris, its first in continental Europe. South Korean electronics giant Samsung said that it would create a large AI centre in or near the capital and employ about 100 researchers. Japanese firm Fujitsu announced plans to make France its European centre of AI research.

POLICY

Fuel efficiency

On 2 April, the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) announced plans to relax fuel-efficiency standards for vehicles manufactured between 2022 and 2025. The current standard, which was finalized in January 2017 after a review by former president Barack Obama's administration, would require the average fuel efficiency for new passenger cars and trucks to be 23.2 kilometres per litre by 2025 — 33% higher than the goal in 2010. EPA chief Scott Pruitt said that the standards had been set too high. He will also reconsider an EPA waiver that allows California to set fuel-efficiency standards independently of

the federal government, and which other states may choose to follow. The agency will work with the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration to establish a new standard.

CRISPR crops

The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) will not regulate plants produced using genome-editing techniques, including CRISPR-Cas9, the agency announced on 28 March — as long as they could also have been created using conventional breeding techniques. The engineered products cannot be plant pests or have been developed using plant pests, and they can't contain genes from distant species. Those plants will still be regulated. The policy reverses rules proposed under former US president Barack Obama. It's unclear whether

food produced from genome-edited plants will need to be labelled as such.

FUNDING

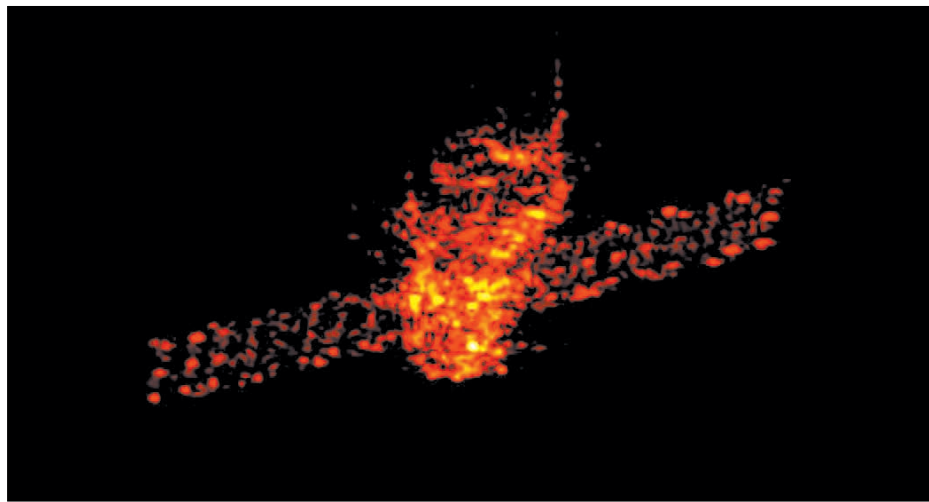
UK funding body

Britain's powerful new research-funding body officially came into existence on 1 April. UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), born out of sweeping higher-education and research reforms passed last year, brings together the country's seven research-funding councils and the business-focused Innovate UK. Research England, a new body that will oversee the research and knowledge-exchange activities of the now-defunct Higher Education Funding Council for England, will fall under the same umbrella. UKRI has an annual budget of £6 billion (US\$8.4 billion) and

is headed by Mark Walport, the government's former chief scientific adviser.

Singapore funding

Singapore's largest national research agency announced that groups doing basic scientific research will need to start competing for all their funding, as part of a reorganization unveiled on 27 March. The Agency for Science, Technology and Research (A*STAR) runs 18 research institutes; it will continue to guarantee core funding to those that partner with industry or focus on technology development. Basic scientists at those centres will be funded entirely through merit-based awards. The changes will take effect from 1 April, but will not affect projects that already have funding.



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Chinese space lab plummets to Earth

The defunct Chinese space station Tiangong-1 re-entered Earth's atmosphere on 2 April, breaking apart over the southern Pacific Ocean at around 00:15 UTC. The bus-sized spacecraft had been in orbit since 2011. Two groups of Chinese astronauts lived and worked

on it in 2012 and 2013, using it as a testbed for a future, larger space station. But in 2016, mission managers lost control of the spacecraft. As a result, it began an uncontrolled descent to Earth, although it was closely watched by organizations that track space debris.