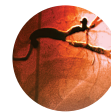


# THIS WEEK

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## Italy must keep its funding pledges

*The collapse of Italy's coalition government has left researchers vulnerable. The incoming administration must keep a longstanding promise to end austerity in funding.*

Last week, Italy's coalition government ended abruptly, when the nationalist Lega party of deputy prime minister Matteo Salvini announced that it was walking away from its turbulent coalition with the anti-establishment M5S party, known as the Five Star Movement. The collapse is of great concern: a much-delayed funding increase is now on hold, and the political uncertainty adds further threat.

What will happen now is unclear. One of the coalition partners could form a government with others in parliament, or an election might be needed if an agreement cannot be reached. Italy's head of state, President Sergio Mattarella, will oversee the process. He needs to use his discussions with party leaders to remind them of the coalition's promise to the nation's scholars: that austerity in research funding would come to an end.

The challenge for whoever takes office is that Italy's economy has been mostly stagnant for a decade. It also has high levels of debt and could be on the brink of a recession. And as Italy, like other European countries, aimed to shrink its budget deficit after the 2008–09 financial crisis, funding for universities took a hit.

The coalition government had promised to return funding for universities to 2009 levels of around €7.5 billion (US\$8.3 billion). It had also vowed to increase a smaller fund for research institutes, known as the FOE, which has consistently been cut since 2013. These increases, although modest, would have provided welcome relief for a system in which most of the funding from the government is currently used to pay for salaries and fixed costs, such as utility bills.

Furthermore, there is a possibility that indirect taxation — value-added tax (VAT) — will need to rise, from 22% to 25%. Italy has exceeded European Union limits on the size of its borrowing, and if the government cannot cut €23 billion from public spending, it will need to raise VAT. That will put even more pressure on research budgets.

Money is not the only issue. Lega was responsible for running the interior ministry, and ministers clashed with scientists on the party's policies towards refugees and asylum-seekers — including an indefensible law that imposes a €1-million fine on humanitarian ships patrolling the Mediterranean looking to save people in distress. Academic independence is also a concern. At the Ministry of Education, University and Research — also the responsibility of Lega — there is evidence that inspectors have been monitoring the teaching of political science in schools. In some classes, they have been discussing whether today's government policies echo Italy's Mussolini-era past. This has unsettled teachers.

And although Italy's spending on research and development — at around 1.3% of its gross domestic product — sits well below the EU average of 2%, its research performance continues to improve. Between 2000 and 2016, Italy's share of published scientific papers increased from 3.2% to 4% and the number of publications as a fraction of spending on research is comfortably above the EU average.

In his resignation speech to Italy's senate, prime minister Giuseppe Conte from the Five Star movement spoke about the need to invest more

in research and to establish a national agency for research — such words are welcome, but not enough, and he must uphold his earlier promises if his party returns to power.

After a decade of austerity, Italy's researchers and research leaders will need to dig deep yet again and find ways to hold the next government accountable for these promises. Mattarella, a former education minister, can and should also play a vital supporting part. As the head of state, he has no executive authority, but he does have moral authority. He needs to use it so that promised funds and scholarly autonomy are protected in the next administration. ■

## Paying the price

*Universities must see that inadequate support of early-career researchers has consequences.*

Letters from research funders to university leaders rarely raise eyebrows. But a letter sent this month by the heads of the United Kingdom's three largest medical-research funders did just that.

It says that some types of funding could be withheld unless universities provide better support for early- and mid-career staff — particularly women and trainees. And it warns that institutions could be prevented from bidding for funded posts unless they change their ways. The letter is signed by the heads of the Medical Research Council, the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) and Wellcome.

What has sparked funder frustration is the fact that universities promise to look after new researchers when applying for grants — making pledges including the provision of quality mentoring, or a path to promotion. But in some cases these commitments are ignored once grant money is banked — sometimes in violation of contracts.

No institutions are named in the letter, a copy of which has been seen by *Nature*, but it points to “some very large and well-established Universities and Medical Schools”.

One of the signatories — the NIHR — was an early adopter of tough measures in support of advancing women's careers. In 2011, it made grants conditional on medical schools achieving a gold or silver in the Athena SWAN Charter, a scheme designed to improve women's career prospects that has also raised awareness of the structural barriers to gender equality in universities.

Athena SWAN has enabled many universities to take positive action to advance equality and diversity. But when it comes to the needs of early- and mid-career clinical researchers, the NIHR and the other medical-research funders are right to challenge universities that are not doing enough. A strongly worded letter warning universities that they could be sanctioned unless they change is a necessary step. ■