

# Editorial

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## Independence day?

### Abstract

Spain has increased science funding but now needs to modernize the organizations at the top.

'New government pledges to double research budget.' How often have scientists heard this type of promise and been disappointed? All the more credit, then, to Spain's politicians, who have delivered on it. When the socialist government swept to power in March 2004, it launched a multifaceted programme called Ingenio 2010, founded on a commitment to raise the country's spending on research from 1.1% of its GDP — well below the European Union average of 1.8% — to 2% by 2010. The civilian research budget has already more than doubled.

Given equivalent budgets, would Spain's researchers be able to deliver the same quality as the big European players? Some of Spain's élite research institutes, such as the CNIO, the national cancer centre in Madrid, already do so. But broader success will depend on Spain's plans to modernize its science management. If the money is to be well spent, the new basic-research agencies currently being created must adopt European Union norms. In particular, they must be free of direct political interference — a point of contention among some government bureaucrats.

Researchers say the new money is already making a palpable difference. The number of research positions, the acceptance rate of grants, and grant sizes have all increased. There are more diverse sources of grants, thanks to strategic programmes opened up within Ingenio 2010. There is significantly more money for infrastructure, and astronomers and particle physicists will gain from Spain's recent membership of the European Southern Observatory and higher subscription to CERN. The budget of the CSIC, the national research organization, which runs 115 research institutes and centres, has seen a healthy 74% increase.

The country seems well placed to absorb the new money. Despite very modest investment over the previous two decades, the quantity and quality of Spanish publications have increased markedly. The bad news is that Spain's science organization is stuck in a time warp. Both the government's research funding department and the CSIC are embedded in a slow and bureaucratic research ministry, where, it is said, a grant application arriving in the first-floor mailroom can take weeks just to arrive in the correct department a few floors higher. Scientists paid from the public purse — at the CSIC or at universities — are civil servants, hired for life and virtually impossible to fire. The positions, like the detailed budgets, are fixed centrally.

Recognizing the need for more flexibility, the government last year passed a law allowing certain ministerial activities to be spun out into more independent agencies. Two of these, now in a rather painful process of creation, will be the CSIC and an agency for research funding, evaluation and foresight.

The new CSIC concept, steered by its president, immunologist Carlos Martínez, will seek government approval in the coming weeks. It allows the CSIC to be run by its president, who must be a respected scientist, with arms-length oversight by government representatives, and with the opportunity to offer scientists negotiable contracts. This change will enable the CSIC's institutes to compete internationally.

This proposal has to make its way through other government departments, no doubt nervous of delegating responsibility for large amounts of public money. It is nevertheless imperative that it emerges as an appropriate model for others to follow. It is equally important that the concept for the research funding, evaluation and foresight agency is accelerated so it can be put in place before Spain's general election in

March next year.

Until Spain has these independent and flexible research structures safely in place, the success of the well-conceived Ingenio 2010 programme is threatened. Failure would be a heavy price to pay for a lack of imagination, especially when the required independence plays such a key part in success elsewhere.

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