

Spain announces last-minute commitment to European infrared telescope

Spain's government has confirmed the country's participation in the European Extremely Large Telescope project, just weeks before construction is due to start.

In a statement on 30 May, the government said it would invest €38 million in the project to allow Spain's researchers to take part in constructing and operating the optical-infrared telescope for 12 years. Despite welcoming the confirmation, the country's researchers have criticised its last-minute nature, which they say is indicative of a wider problem.

"This has been truly scandalous. We were told a year ago that Spain was going to join, but we have had to wait one whole year for the official announcement," says Javier Gorgas, president of the Spanish Astronomical Society. "We feel embarrassed because other countries in financial difficulties, such as Portugal, have already said yes."

But a spokesman for the ministry for economy and competitiveness told *Research Europe* that, although Spain was the penultimate country to commit to the telescope, the decision was still taken within the required time scale. The delay in confirmation was mainly because of negotiations between the government and the European Southern Observatory, where the telescope is based, to expand the payment period from 10 to 12 years, as well as discussions with industry to confirm its commitment, the spokesman says.

According to Gorgas, delays by the government in

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taking decisions on Spain's participation in international projects is damaging the image of its researchers in Europe. Its involvement in European Space Agency projects is a case in point, he says. "Initially, we were told that we would only participate in the compulsory part of the missions, meaning many of our researchers would be left out," says Gorgas. "We are meeting our international commitments very badly."

Spain has suffered a series of cuts to its science budget in recent years, losing about 40 per cent of its research funding since 2008. But Gorgas says that bureaucratic delays are the major problem for the country's astronomers. "Cuts have not been that significant in astronomy," he says. "What has really damaged us is complete havoc in resolving calls for proposals for state research projects."

Projects due to start in January 2013 only received their funding in October, and a third of them are still on hold, according to Gorgas. This has caused significant interruption to ongoing projects and is contributing to many researchers leaving Spain, he says.

The ministry aims to resolve outstanding allocations for research projects quickly and to restore a normal calendar of deadlines by 2015, the spokesman says. According to the ministry, public research spending is up by 6.3 per cent in 2014—the first increase since 2009.

nations in brief

Research careers under threat, says French union

Stagnation in higher education spending has led to a drop in the hiring of academic staff and the number of tenure track and professorial positions available in France, according to the country's national union of scientific researchers. The FSU union says the number of doctorates in France has fallen to about 12,000 a year, considerably lower than in the UK (20,000) and Germany (27,000).

Rectors speak up for Greek education

University rectors in Germany have said that Greece's government must not damage higher education as it attempts to reduce public debt. According to the HRK, Germany's association of rectors, funding cuts in Greece must be incorporated into a wider plan for the development of higher education.

French economists missing out

Economics research at French universities must become more international and multidisciplinary to remain

competitive, according to a government-commissioned report. Economics teaching in the country is outdated, meaning research does not stray beyond the mainstream, the report says. It adds that universities that teach economics rarely collaborate internationally or judge their work by international standards.

Universities encouraged to reach out

The Stifterverband, Germany's association of research funders, has established a €240,000 pot to help universities engage with society. The funding will be used for community-based research, environmental work and networks to facilitate interactions between academic staff, students and local communities.

International students on the rise

The number of international students in France increased by 50 per cent between 2007 and 2012, according to a report from the UN's education branch Unesco. There were 271,000 international students in the country in 2012, making France the third most popular destination behind the United States and the UK.