

Spain faces brain drain as cuts force scientists to leave

March 29 2012, by Daniel Silva



A scientist works at a laboratory in Madrid in 2003. Growing numbers of Spanish scientists are looking to move abroad as steep government spending cuts cause job opportunities to dry up and work conditions to worsen, with no money for lab equipment.

With his contract about to run out and no opportunities on the horizon in Spain, paleontologist Diego Garcia-Bellido Capdevila has started looking for work abroad.

"A university in Australia has already said they would love to have me. But I would prefer to keep carrying out research in the name of [Spain](#)," said Capdevila, whose articles have run in top [scientific journals](#) such as Nature.

Like Capdevila, growing numbers of Spanish scientists are looking to

move abroad as steep [government spending](#) cuts cause [job opportunities](#) to dry up and work conditions to worsen, with no money for lab equipment.

Spain slashed spending on research and development by just over one billion euros (\$1.3 billion) between 2009 and 2011 -- from 9.662 billion to 8.586 billion.

Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy's conservative government, in power since December, plans to slash science spending this year by around 600 million euros as it tries to rein in the public deficit and convince markets that Spain will not need a financial bailout like Greece, Ireland and Portugal.

The cuts have led to a sharp reduction in [new jobs](#) at public research centres.

The Spanish National Research Council (CSIC), the largest public institution dedicated to research in Spain and the third largest in Europe, will not hire a single scientist this year to work at its 133 centres.

Five years ago, in 2007, it hired 250 scientists.

"With such a drastic drop in hiring, people are going to leave. What else are they going to do? There are no alternatives," said Amaya Moro-Martin, 37, an [astrophysicist](#) who, like Capdevila, works at a CSIC research centre.

"Spain is facing a serious flight of its scientists."

Her contract expires in October 2013 and she has also started to look for work outside Spain.

Spanish scientists have issued an open letter to the government that warns the country faces a "multi-generational [brain drain](#)" unless it makes research and development spending a priority. The letter has been signed by over 40,000 people, more than half of them researchers.

"If Spain does not take urgent action to preserve the scientific workforce of highest quality, the research system will take decades to recover, dragging down the desired shift to a knowledge-based economy," the letter reads.

It points out that European economic powerhouses like Germany and France have boosted their spending research in response to the economic downturn.

"Nations that invest more in science are those that have lower unemployment rates," said Salce Elvira Gomez, the secretary for research and development at Spain's largest trade union, the Workers' Commissions (CCOO).

Last month the union published a major study into the state of scientific research in Spain.

Gomez said she had noticed the start of a "brain drain", but concrete figures about how many scientists have left Spain or are thinking of doing so were not available.

"The numbers trickle in. Researchers finish a project and they leave. We are talking about thousands of researchers," she said.

"We are training great researchers whom we then don't take advantage of, who will have to go to other countries instead of staying here to do their work."

Capdevila -- who is 41 and earns 1,800 euros a month -- said scientists were drawn abroad not so much because of the higher salaries they earn there, but because of the greater job stability offered.

"We don't want to be millionaires. We just want to have a house and a car and be able to survive by carrying out research," he said.

While patent applications from Germany rose by 5.7 percent in 2011 over the previous year, applications from Spain fell by 2.7 percent, figures from the Geneva-based World Intellectual Property Organization show.

In one of the most dramatic examples of the impact of the spending cuts, in November a flagship biomedical research facility in Valencia, the Prince Felipe Research Centre, fired 108 of its 258 workers -- including 79 scientists -- and pulled the plug on its research into 14 diseases including cancer.

The centre was able to hire back one scientist who did research into diabetes -- but that was after the mother of a girl who has the disease raised nearly 8,000 euros through raffles and selling snacks and T-shirts to continue paying the researcher's salary.

"I don't know what I would have done if it wasn't for this," said the scientist, 37-year-old Silvia Sanz.

"Many of my coworkers who lost their jobs have gone to the United States."

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