

Budget cuts are harder if people know the benefits of research

April 24 2015, by Maggie Hardy



An uncertain future for science funding as the federal budget draws closer.
Credit: Maggie Hardy

An old academic joke you start to hear around federal budget time goes something like this: "Researchers could strike but no one would care, because no one would know we've gone until 10 or 15 years later."

Most of us working on the coal face of [science](#) probably won't see any outcomes in our lifetime – although with the [rapid developments](#) in technology that may be changing.

It takes a large degree of foresight to continue funding research when we know the result is decades away, and it says a lot for Australians that we've been so successful on a global stage.

But already this year researchers have battled with threats of funding cuts for [critical infrastructure](#), through a scheme called NCRIS. With an outpouring of public support, from researchers and our supporters, the decision was reversed and 1,700 jobs in Australia were saved, but only for another year.

The Future Fellows scheme, which funds 100 to 200 outstanding mid-career researchers, hasn't been so lucky. Originally designed to be a five-year [program](#), this is the only one of its kind from the Australian Research Council (ARC), one of two major national funding bodies for research.

At this time, no new funding program has been proposed to replace Future Fellows, and the state of this scheme remains undecided.

What are scientists doing?

How we measure the value of research, and those who conduct the research, is difficult to determine. A recent [report](#) prepared for the Office of the Chief Scientist and the Australian Academy of Science showed that the advanced physical and mathematical sciences contribute around A\$145 billion to the economy each year.

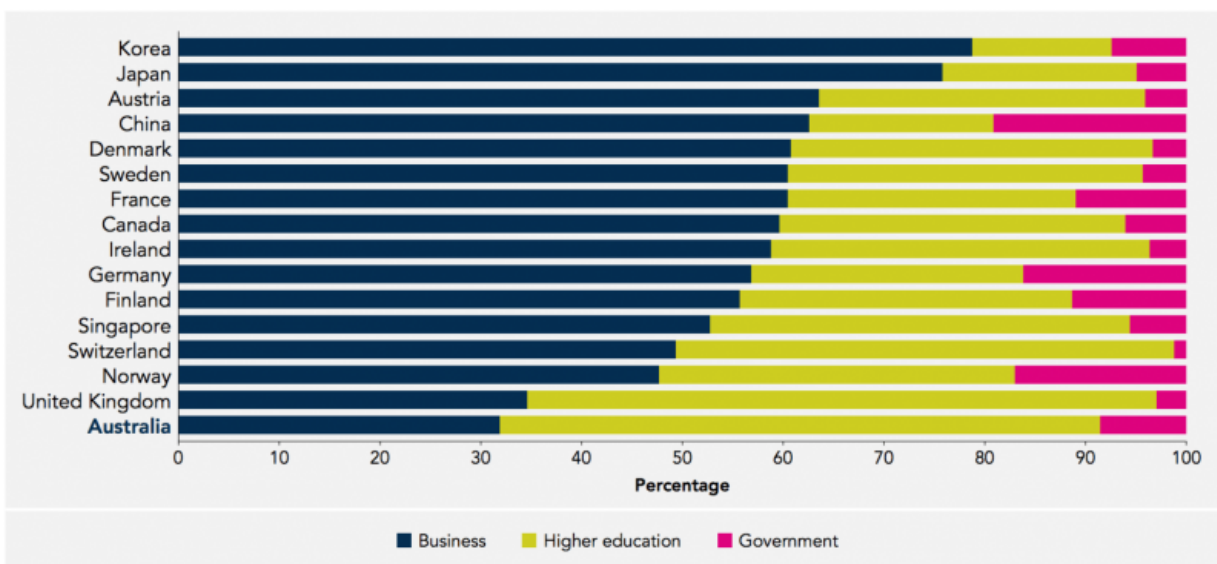
About 7% of total Australian employment (760,000 jobs) is directly related to advanced sciences. But we should remember science and research also contribute to our lives in intangible ways, and to the development of Australia's future leaders, too.

[Most of us](#) work at institutions of higher education, and the rest in

business or government positions.

Investing in research is a smart move. A 2011 [analysis](#) found for every dollar invested in any of four research institutes at [The University of Queensland](#) (Institute for Molecular Bioscience ([IMB](#)), the Australian Institute for Bioengineering and Nanotechnology ([AIBN](#)), the Queensland Brain Institute ([QBI](#)) and the Sustainable Minerals Institute ([SMI](#)), between A\$15 to A\$17 dollars are returned to the Queensland economy.

Who gets to talk about science



Employment of researchers, by sector, 2011, from the Office of the Chief Scientists report: Benchmarking Australian Science, Technology, Engineering & Mathematics. Credit: Office of the Chief Scientist/OECD, MSTI, January 2014., CC BY-NC

Taxpayers should be told how their money is being spent, and that isn't

just limited to the number of papers published. How scientists are being trained, and how we are taught to communicate our science, should be a priority as well.

Professor Les Field, secretary for science policy at the Australian Academy of Science, sees the value in working to raise the profile of research in the community:

The case for investing in science (in its broadest sense) would be much easier if science enjoyed a similar profile with the public as, say, health, education, sport, or social services. And there is nothing that will convince Government of the value of science than an overwhelming positive groundswell from the public.

His comments are [part of an introduction](#) to a [forum](#) taking place in Adelaide this week for early- and mid-career researchers (EMCRs). The aim is to improve their communication skills so they can better explain what they are doing and why.

Dr [Sharath Sriram](#), chair of the Australian EMCR Forum, told me of the importance of promoting [science communication](#) among early-stage researchers:

Most scientists are excellent at what they do in relation to asking probing questions to draw answers to their research problem. ECMRs represent the future scientific leaders and it is critical that they learn to frame the content of their communication to the context and their audience, rather than losing the information in jargon or dismissing the importance of science communication.

The conference will use a combination of panel discussions and examples of best practices to illustrate four pillars of science communication:

- the practice of communicating research
- defining and refining your message
- communicating with others outside your discipline
- working with the media.

The way forward

The more the public know and care about what Australian research is focused on, and the value of that research, then perhaps we will have a broad, vocal base of advocates for research.

But if no one cares if researchers strike, what can we do when our livelihood is threatened?

In 2011, in response to reports that the federal budget was set to cut medical research funding, the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research started the [Discoveries Need Dollars](#) campaign.

Nearly 14,000 Australians signed their petition to maintain funding, and the funding was ultimately maintained.

We need to work together, as a community, to protect the investments that are valuable to us as a nation, and as a leader on the world stage.

So researchers who haven't already started to communicate what they're doing to others outside their field should consider doing so. It can be good for their research, for their track record, and for their funding – not to mention useful when applying for promotion. They should also let their local communications officer know they're keen.

More importantly, ahead of this May's [federal budget](#) we can all talk to our [elected officials](#) and let the government know we value Australian research, and our researchers.

This story is published courtesy of [The Conversation](#) (under Creative Commons-Attribution/No derivatives).

Source: The Conversation

Citation: Budget cuts are harder if people know the benefits of research (2015, April 24)
retrieved 21 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-04-harder-people-benefits.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.