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Brain drain in Spain leaves scientific research on the wane

By Tobias Buck in Madrid

Amaya Moro-Martín returned to Spain five years ago, after spending 11 years researching astrophysics at some of the best universities in the US.

She was lured from Princeton to Madrid with the help of the prestigious Ramón y Cajal programme, a five-year fellowship that offers top researchers generous funding and a tenured position in Spain.

Ms Moro-Martín's fellowship runs out at the end of this year – but the promise of a tenured position has evaporated.

Spending on science and research has been cut dramatically as part of the Spanish government's broader austerity programme. Universities and research centres complain there is sometimes not even money to pay for gloves, lab coats and basic materials such as liquid nitrogen.

New teaching posts, such as the one promised to Ms Moro-Martín and other Ramón y Cajal fellows, are few and far between – a dearth that is driving many of the best young Spanish scientists out of the country or out of academic research altogether.

“We basically have no hope of getting a permanent position. There is no future for us here so we have to leave,” says Ms Moro-Martín.

After five years at the Centre for Astrobiology in Madrid, she will pack her bags at the end of the year to take up a new position at a US space research centre in Baltimore. It is, she says, a familiar story: “When you walk through my centre these days, you can hear the echo of silence. It is emptying.”

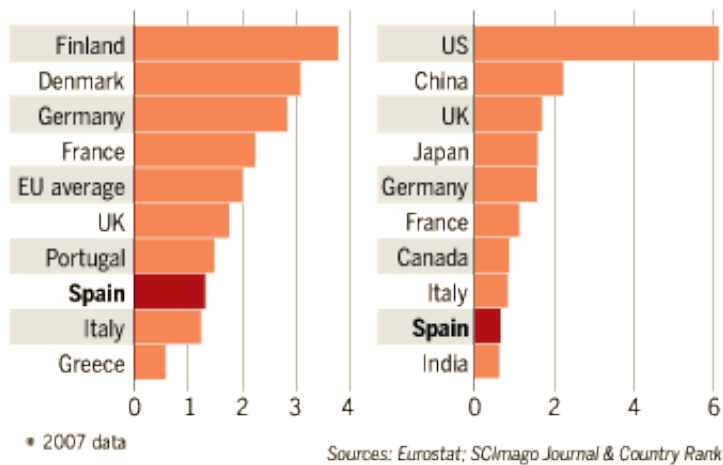
On Friday, thousands of young scientists and researchers will once again take to the streets of Madrid, Barcelona and other Spanish cities to highlight their plight – and to warn of the risks that the current brain-drain poses to the country in the long term.

Critics accuse the government of hacking away at one of the key pillars of future economic recovery.

“The government itself says that our economy

Scientific standing

Gross domestic expenditure on R&D, 2011 (% of GDP)*



should be based on innovation. They say we need innovation – but then they go and cut the money to support innovation,” says Anxo Sánchez, a professor of applied mathematics at Carlos III University in Madrid.

The controversy highlights a searing dilemma faced by many of southern Europe’s cash-strapped governments: how to cut spending and lower the budget deficit without undermining their country’s long-term economic prospects. In the case of Spain, the government has offered tax breaks and other incentives to the private sector, in an attempt to encourage more R&D spending by corporations.

It is far from clear, however, that such measures can compensate for the damage inflicted on state-funded universities and research centres. Government spending on R&D has been cut by 40 per cent since 2009, even though Spain’s R&D budget already ranks far below that of other European countries.

Under the current austerity regime, universities and research centres are allowed to replace only one in 10 positions that fall vacant – but even that goal is not always met: at Spain’s Higher Council for Scientific Research (CSIC), which runs more than 130 research centres across the country, there is money for only five new positions in 2013 – a fraction of the 150 jobs that are expected to be vacated this year.

Staffing aside, scientists complain that the government is holding back funding promised for research itself; scientists who won government research grants last year have yet to see any of the money promised for this.

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“If you need to buy equipment or you need to hire a technician, you are effectively dead,” says Prof Sánchez. “This is a total mess. The cuts are of such a size that the whole scientific community is in depression.”

Spain’s ministry for the economy – which was put in charge of research policy after the abolition of a standalone ministry for science – admits there are funding problems. It has promised a financial package to alleviate the funding gap at CSIC, and is working on a study to determine whether Spain is indeed suffering a scientific brain drain.

But senior officials have on occasions sounded a sanguine note that has angered researchers – for example by stressing the

importance for scientists to gain experience abroad.

“With the people you are losing now you are losing decades,” says Ms Moro-Martín, who is part of a grassroots movement to protest against the cuts. “There are some research areas where Spain is very competitive, but in a few years all this is being destroyed.

She urges the government to think about the message it is sending to young students in schools and universities.

“These budget cuts are undermining the potential of the country to change its economic model,” she says. “Who in their right mind will want to do science for a living?”

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