

2015 Federal budget – summary and analysis of major science and research announcements

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NCRIS

Funding of \$150 million had already been provided for 2015-16, and the Government will now provide an additional \$150 million in 2016-17. This ensures there will be a further two years of support for NCRIS facilities. The elephant that is still in-the-room is how to bring longer term sustainability to support for big infrastructure. We do need to find a way to support big initiatives that have a lifetime of decades and can't really be run effectively on 2-year stop-start funding cycles. A review of the NCRIS program is underway and is expected to make long-term funding recommendations. The review is expected to report in August 2015.

University research block grants

The Sustainable Research Excellence component of the university block grant will be cut by \$260 million over the forward estimates (and by \$150 million in 2016-17 alone) to fund support for NCRIS. This is a significant cut to the research block grant to universities which directly supports the research effort of each University. It will impact mostly on the larger research intensive Group of Eight universities who receive the most significant share of the Sustainable Research Excellence block grant.

NHMRC

There is no significant change in the forward estimates.

Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF)

The Government continues with plans to establish a \$20 billion fund, the capital of which will be reserved and investment returns used to fund research. Disbursements over the next four years are expected to be \$10 million in 2015-16, \$53 million in 2016-17, \$130 million in 2017-18 and \$224 million in 2018-19, which will mean more than \$400 million is expected to be provided to researchers over the forward estimates.

This is a very positive step towards boosting investment in medical research in Australia and a commitment to making this a sustainable future fund over time. The controversial link between funding for the MRFF being linked to the Medicare co-payment has been removed. Instead funding for the MRFF will come from other savings in the health budget.

Australian Synchrotron

An allocation of \$20.5 million in 2016-17 to ANSTO has been made to meet part of the \$30.0 million cost of operating the Australian Synchrotron in 2016-17. This is made up of an additional \$13 million expenditure and reallocation of \$7.5 million from other sources.

ANSTO

To assist with the cost of processing existing radioactive waste an additional \$22.3 million will be provided to ANSTO over three years from 2015-16.

ARC –total grant funding programs

There are no significant change in the forward estimates.

ARC Future Fellowships

Whilst there was no announcement within the Budget the Government is expected to support a reduced round of 50 Future Fellowships in the coming year although. My reading is that there is a strong desire to support the Future Fellowships into the future (hopefully back to the level that restores the capacity that has been eroded over recent years) but that this will depend on finding additional revenue or offsets to support the scheme.

The University Sector – Higher Education

While there is no immediate change to the operating grants for Universities, the forward estimates still contain a 20% reduction in support for universities coupled to a deregulation of the sector. This dramatic change to the funding model for universities still hangs over the sector and there is a clear signal that the government still intends to pursue its deregulation agenda.

CSIRO

There are no significant change in the forward estimates however the significant savings projected in last year's budget are still forecast in the forward estimates so the trajectory set in the 2014 budget remains.

Square Kilometre Array Radio Telescope

There was no announcement within the Budget and funding is set to end at the end of 2015/16. This now stands as another piece of major research infrastructure whose long term future is uncertain.

Defence Science Technology Organisation

There is no significant change until 2017-18 when there will be a reduction of \$23 million.

Australian Astronomical Observatory

There is a slight reduction in funding over the forward estimates

Geoscience Australia

There is no significant change over the forward estimates

Australian Institute of Marine Science

There is no significant change over the forward estimates

Australia-China/India Fund

These funds will continue over the forward estimate period

Rural Research and Development Corporations

There is no significant change over the forward estimates

Australian Consensus Centre

As already announced \$4.0 million will be provided over four years from 2014-15 to establish the Australian Consensus Centre. This Centre is still looking for a home given that the University of Western Australia announced that it would not be housed on their campus.

Antarctic science

An additional \$9.4 million will be provided in 2015-16 to maintain functions that support Australia's presence in Antarctica.

Tropical health

An additional \$15.3 million will be provided over the next four years to invest in research into exotic disease threats to Australia and the region. This will include \$8.5 million for the Australian Tropical Medicine Commercialisation Grants Programme and \$6.8 million to the NHMRC to build capacity in tropical disease research.

Cooperative Research Centres

A further \$26.8 million in savings over four years from 2015-16 have been identified. The CRC program is currently under review ("the Miles Review"). The recommendations from the review should be available soon but the announcement of this cut to the program will put some limitations on how any recommendations from the review might be implemented. This announcement is counter-intuitive given that the Government's stated desire towards enhancing the engagement between industry and the university sector.

Entrepreneurs' Infrastructure Program

The Government will make savings of \$27.3 million over five years from 2014-15 to Entrepreneur's Infrastructure Program.

Industry grant programs

Further savings of \$31.7 million from commercialisation, enterprise connection and the industry innovation precincts. These programs were already closed to new applicants so this appears to be the decreasing pipeline of programs that were already funded.

The Conversation

Funding for *The Conversation* which is an on-line media organisation promoting debate on a wide range of topics has not been renewed. The conversation has proved to be valuable forum in which issues can be aired and discussed rapidly and openly.