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Catalan upheaval leaves researchers in limbo

University accounts in government hands, as unrest grows

SCIENTISTS IN CATALONIA REMAIN divided on the benefits of independence two weeks after the Spanish government took control of the bank accounts of universities.

The vote for independence on 1 October, which was declared unconstitutional by the Spanish government, threw Spain into its worst political crisis in four decades. Before the referendum, Spain's ministry of finance took control of the accounts of 297 public organisations based in Catalonia to ensure that funds would not be diverted to help the vote.

At present, universities' and institutions' accounts are still being monitored. Carmen Vela, secretary of state for research, told the finance ministry that research should be excluded from the move.

Vela's appeal was rejected. She told Research Europe that she would lobby for the accounts to be released as soon as possible. Meanwhile, the procedure for institutions to account for every payment is working well and there is no disruption to research, she said.

"Even with this additional administrative step everything is moving quickly and easily regarding the Catalan research system," Vela said. "I have not heard of a single salary paid late."

Catalonia is good at winning European Research Council funds, receiving 210 grants—worth €334 million—between 2007 and 2015. The region comes fourth behind Switzerland, Israel and the Netherlands, for research grants won per capita, according to the Catalan government.

Lluís Rovira, director of the Cerca research institute, which represents 41 institutions, said that a decade ago, Spanish government funding played a big part in the region's research. But today, after Spain-wide cuts to the research budget, it accounts for only 24 per cent—making European funding important, he said.

Rovira said he believed that Catalonia would not lose out on EU funds if it became independent, but would adopt a model of associate membership similar to Switzerland's or Norway's, by paying for projects that it participates in.

"We don't believe we are going to lose all the money," he said. "The projects have been selected for their inter-

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est, so the EU will continue to back those projects."

One argument that the pro-independence side has made against research funding from Madrid is that it is distributed geographically rather than based on excellence. This leaves Catalonia with between 20 to 25 per cent of the funds, "but if we compete in terms of quality we [would] get 50 per cent", said Rovira.

The Catalan government, which was granted more autonomy by the 1978 constitution, has aimed to break from what it says are rigid recruitment and funding rules in Spanish higher education. In 2014, Catalan ministers adopted a tax relief policy of 30 to 50 per cent for venture capitalists investing in university research spin-offs.

Arcadi Navarro, the secretary for universities and research in the Catalan government, said that it is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain this system because it is not compatible with Spanish law.

"With independence we could implement measures that the state has banned," said Navarro. Even though his government's suggestions of funding reforms have not happened, there are "some people" in Madrid who see things their way, he said. "We have not discovered the Mediterranean here, what we do has been copied from other [more successful] countries," said Navarro.

Spanish research has suffered as a result of the recession. Research was one of the first areas to be cut in the national budget, and although funding increased between 2015 and 2017, this didn't compensate for the earlier decreases.

Spaniard Marian Arribas-Tome, a tutor at the University of East Anglia in the UK, said that complaints concerning flexibility and frequency of research funding were not unique to Catalonia.

"In the narrative of nationalists there is a need for empathy in people's eyes, so anything that can be used to contribute to that, well, it's going to be used," she said.

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