

# Australasian Science

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The delayed release of three government-controlled reviews of research funding has given the scientific community affected by the profound changes they propose virtually no time to influence policy and financial decisions before this month's Budget.

The reviews had been completed months before the Education, Science and Training Minister, Dr Brendan Nelson, released them on 24 March. By then the Budget's parameters had already been set in wet concrete.

Nelson has made no commitment to follow the reviews' recommendations even though the government had tightly controlled them. Obediently, the reviews have not made any specific financial proposals for the Budget, but Nelson has committed to delivering a package that will continue, and perhaps extend, the Innovation Statement of 2001.

Sources in government have been feeding to mainstream reporters the prospect of "some surprises", but there was cold comfort from Nelson's words to the National Press Club when he said "there is a limit... to how much Australia will be able to invest in science".

The Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee has called for Australia to set an ambitious target to lift investment in R&D from 1.5% of Gross Domestic Product (and sinking) to 2% by 2010 and 3% by 2020. These figures are in line with similar targets recently set by countries such as Canada and France.

But it will be a stretch to reach these goals. The National Tertiary Education Union calculates that additional public investment in R&D of \$2.4 billion is needed between 2006–07 and the end of the decade simply to maintain existing levels as a proportion of GDP. Others estimate that true recovery and real growth will require around \$5 billion.

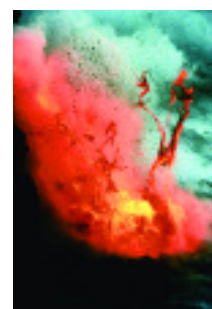
Trouble is on the horizon for CSIRO, too, as it faces the "Collaboration" review's recommendation that CSIRO's second attempt to restore block funding over a triennium be deferred while the agency is pushed to a more openly "contestable" scheme. CSIRO's Chief Executive, Dr Geoff Garrett, who had never previously queried the government, then went silent when *Australasian Science* asked for his plans if CSIRO fails to win triennial funding or any additional new money for his pet project, the six research Flagships.

In the election atmosphere, though, it's likely the Howard government will not risk more headlines of "CSIRO cut again" and will offer a modest recovery from the dreadful squeeze it placed on CSIRO in 1996.

The government has let the research community wallow for 8 years. While claiming its 2001 scheme was the largest boost to R&D, the \$2.9 billion offered over 5 years is only barely keeping pace with the growth of GDP. On this record, Australia's scientists, especially its budding ones, have every right to be sceptical of conjuring tricks in this month's Budget.

## ABOUT THE COVER

In 1990 the discovery of a crater 200 km wide in the Gulf of Mexico gave credence to the theory that the dinosaur extinctions had been caused by a meteor impact 65 million years ago. But what caused the other mass extinctions in the Earth's history? There is now evidence linking the dates of mass extinctions with volcanic activity, including a massive volcanic province that now lies dormant across northern Australia (see pp.14–18).



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