

## EVENTS

### University strike

UK academics began a strike on 22 February, over changes to their pension scheme that they say would leave them thousands of pounds worse off a year in retirement. More than 42,000 academics — members of the University and College Union — from 64 universities were called out on strike. See page 14 for more.

### Gene-editing deal

US drug firm Gilead Sciences will invest up to US\$3 billion in a company that specializes in gene-editing technology, it said on 22 February. Gilead subsidiary Kite will partner with Sangamo Therapeutics of Richmond, California, which has developed gene-editing techniques based on enzymes called zinc-finger nucleases. The goal is to develop cell therapies against cancer, including treatments that could be used in many people, rather than being tailor-made from an individual's own cells. Kite is headquartered in Santa Monica, California.

### Turkish statement

Turkey's Science Academy has issued a rebuke to its government over what it says are "growing restraints" on freedom of expression in the nation. In a statement posted on 22 February, it says that academics who are critical of their government's policies are routinely charged with supporting terrorism, leading to dismissal from their universities or arrest — and that their claims of injustice are not properly investigated. It argues that the constitutional right to freely express opinions is the "foundation of the freedom of science", and is not legally affected by the ongoing state-of-emergency measures



MIKE HUTCHINGS/REUTERS

## Cape Town expected to run dry in July

Officials in Cape Town, South Africa, have pushed back the date they expect the city to run out of water to 9 July, according to a 19 February announcement. Called Day Zero, the date is based on the amount of water left in reservoirs and has shifted multiple times, ranging from mid-April to early July. The city would be the first major metropolis

to run dry. The temporary reprieve is the result of water restrictions that limit each person to less than 50 litres of water a day. Not all residents are abiding by this, but the weekly drop in dam levels has slowed slightly. Farmers north of Cape Town have also begun transferring some of their water to the city's reservoirs.

introduced after a failed coup attempt against the Turkey's government in July 2016.

### US retreat

The US National Science Foundation plans to close all three of its overseas offices — in Beijing, Tokyo and Brussels — in the coming months. The offices, which together cost about US\$2 million a year, are meant to promote collaboration between US and international researchers. The Tokyo office opened in 1960, the European office (initially in Paris) in 1984 and the Beijing one in 2006. The agency announced on 21 February that it would instead send agency experts for "short-term expeditions to selected areas to explore opportunities for collaboration".

## POLICY

### Primeval forest

Increased logging in Poland's ancient Białowieża Forest breaches European Union nature laws, a leading official of the European Court of Justice (ECJ) has declared. In 2016, the Polish government tripled the logging limit in the forest — which is one of Europe's last patches of primeval forest and is protected by EU wildlife laws — on the grounds that a beetle pest needed to be controlled. Last July, the ECJ issued an interim order to stop tree-felling in strictly protected parts of the forest at Poland's border with Belarus, but logging continued. In a legal opinion published on 20 February, the ECJ's advocate-general proposes

that the court should rule that the Polish government has failed to meet its obligations under the EU's habitats and birds directives. The court is expected to deliver its final judgment on the case in March.

### South Africa chief

In a cabinet reshuffle on 26 February by South Africa's new president, the science and technology minister, Naledi Pandor, was moved to the post of higher-education minister. Observers hope that Pandor, who has been lauded for her contribution to research in Africa, will stabilize the country's underfunded tertiary-education system. South African universities have struggled to deal with violent protests for free education and calls for racial and curriculum

change. Mmamoloko Kubayi-Ngubane, previously minister of communications, becomes science minister. She will guide the country through projects including the Square Kilometre Array, a multi-million-dollar radio telescope to be built in South Africa and Australia.

## PUBLISHING

**Open-access review**

The United Kingdom's main public research funder will reassess its open-access policy, amid concern that a national drive to make papers free to read might not be financially sustainable. A new UK Research and Innovation body will unite nine UK research-funding agencies when it begins work in April. It will conduct an internal review of the policy this year, its chief executive, Mark Walport, said at a meeting on 20 February. Since 2013, British research councils have provided block grants totalling more than £80 million (US\$112 million) to help universities pay fees to subscription publishers to make studies open-access; Walport said the policy has not met its targets.

## RESEARCH

**Canada survey**

Just over half of Canadian government scientists say they cannot speak freely about their

work, according to a survey released on 21 February by the Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada in Ottawa. Some survey respondents said that middle managers are clinging to old restrictions that hinder the sharing of scientific findings, two years after the government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau lifted such rules. Of about 3,000 survey respondents, 47% reported that they can speak freely to the media about their work, up from 10% in 2013. The percentage who agreed that political interference is an obstacle to using scientific evidence in decision-making dropped from 71% to 40%.

## PEOPLE

**Quark pioneer**

Canadian-born physicist Richard Taylor, the co-discoverer of quarks, died on 22 February, aged 88. In experiments that began in the late 1960s at the Stanford Linear Accelerator Center in California, Taylor (pictured) and his collaborators smashed high-energy electrons into protons and found that the electrons bounced off in a surprising pattern. They later interpreted the results as confirmation of a theory proposed a few years earlier, in which particles such as protons and neutrons are composed



of quarks and gluons. In 1990, Taylor shared a Nobel physics prize for the discovery.

**European chief**

The European Commission has appointed French civil servant Jean-Eric Paquet as director-general of research and innovation. His main challenge will be to implement the ninth European Union Framework Programme (FP9), the bloc's chief science-funding mechanism, which launches in 2021. Details of the seven-year programme, whose budget is likely to exceed €100 million (US\$123 million), will be announced by June. Paquet has held several commission posts over 23 years, including one in the cabinet of a previous research commissioner. He takes office on 1 April, replacing Robert-Jan Smits, who designed the current Framework programme, called Horizon 2020, and the scope of FP9.

## FACILITIES

**Arecibo shift**

A consortium led by the University of Central Florida in Orlando will take over management of the Arecibo radio telescope in Puerto Rico from 1 April. It is a major shift for the historic facility, which has long been supported by the US National Science Foundation; the agency decided to divest itself of Arecibo to free up money for other astronomical facilities. The new management team includes the Metropolitan University in San Juan and Yang Enterprises of Oviedo, Florida. In announcing the decision on 22 February, the team said that it would introduce new technologies to expand the capabilities of the telescope, which not only does radio astronomy but also tracks asteroids and studies atmospheric physics.

## FUNDING

**Singapore budget**

In Singapore's 2018 budget, the government announced that its investment in research and development (R&D) will remain at 1% of the country's gross domestic product: 4.6 billion Singapore dollars (US\$3.5 billion). The budget, released on 19 February, also committed 50 million Singapore dollars to a partnership between the National Research Foundation (NRF) and state investor Temasek Holdings, with the aim of growing start-ups using intellectual property commercialized from NRF-funded research. Temasek will commit an equal sum to the scheme. The government pledged 500 million Singapore dollars for programmes to assist companies in developing and testing automated and digital technologies for the aviation and maritime industries.

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## TREND WATCH

The publication of 625 ancient-human genomes in two studies last month has nearly doubled the number of such genomes published, to about 1,300. In the past decade, the ancient-genomics field has been propelled both by improvements in sequencing technologies that can read the short pieces of DNA typically found in ancient-human remains, and by sampling of a DNA-rich inner-ear bone called the petrous — allowing researchers to do less sequencing to get the data they need.

**ANCIENT-GENOMICS BOOM IN FULL SWING**

The first ancient-human genome was published eight years ago. Two February studies publishing 625 genomes now push the total to more than 1,300.

