

News in brief



AUSTRALIAN RESEARCH GETS BILLION-DOLLAR BOOST

Australia's universities and national science agency have been thrown a lifeline in the national budget, the country's first since the pandemic began. As part of a major spending spree designed to kick-start the economy, universities are set to receive Aus\$1 billion (US\$710 million) in new funding to support research next year, and the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation will receive an extra Aus\$459 million over four years.

Researchers say the funding is a welcome boost, particularly for universities, which say they are in a dire financial situation because of the coronavirus pandemic. Universities are forecast to lose up to Aus\$7.6 billion in revenue that they would normally use to fund research over the next five years, largely because of a drop in the number of fee-paying international students.

But academics maintain that the government needs to do more to sustain future research. "We still have to figure out how to pay salaries beyond 2021," says Duncan Ivison, deputy vice-chancellor for research at the University of Sydney.

The budget also includes Aus\$238 million for the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation over four years.

A PUSH TO MAKE ABSTRACTS FREE IN ONE PLACE

In a bid to boost the reach and reuse of scientific results, a group of scholarly publishers has pledged to make abstracts of research papers free to read in a cross-disciplinary repository.

Most abstracts are already available to view on journal websites or on scholarly databases such as PubMed, even if the papers themselves are behind paywalls. But this patchwork limits the reach and visibility of global research, says Ludo Waltman, deputy director of the Centre for Science and Technology Studies at Leiden University in the Netherlands, and coordinator of the initiative for open abstracts, called I4OA.

Publishers involved in I4OA, which was launched on 24 September, have agreed to submit their article summaries to Crossref, an agency that registers scholarly papers' unique digital object identifiers. Crossref will make the abstracts available in a common format. So far, 56 publishers have signed up, including the American Association for the Advancement of Science and the US National Academy of Sciences.

Through Crossref, which is now used by most academic publications, research abstracts across disciplines will become machine-readable and easily searchable, says Waltman.

The initiative aims to emulate I4OC, a scheme established three years ago to make metadata and bibliographical references openly available through Crossref. Since its launch, 2,000 publishers have signed up to I4OC. And as of July 2020, 60% of the 51.1 million articles with references deposited with Crossref had open references.



US CIVIL-RIGHTS GROUP OFFERS SUPPORT TO RESEARCHERS FACING CHINA SCRUTINY

An Asian American civil-rights group has launched an effort to support Chinese and Chinese American researchers who are facing inquiries from law-enforcement agencies as a result of the United States' increased crack-down on foreign interference. The organization, Asian Americans Advancing Justice (AAJC) in Washington DC, will educate scientists about their rights and provide legal resources for those who are questioned by the FBI.

"To the best of our knowledge, it's the first effort of this kind to focus on the Chinese scientific and academic community," says John Yang, the president and executive director of the AAJC.

The effort started to take shape in November 2018, when the US Department of Justice announced the China Initiative. The agency declared that it would be focusing on Chinese espionage, including in universities. Scientists and lawmakers have raised concerns that the US government's actions are unfairly focused on Chinese scientists, and researchers themselves have expressed worries about being caught in the dragnet.

Agency leaders have insisted that the country's interest is

in a few select cases of illegal or non-compliant behaviour, and that it is not intended to target people because of their racial or ethnic background. "It's not about profiling," said Kelvin Droegemeier, science adviser to US President Donald Trump, at a presentation to US universities this month. "It's about making sure you play by the rules."

Cases in which foreign researchers are charged with espionage are complex, and legal firms might be reluctant to take them on, says Yang. So the AAJC project offers to refer Asian and Asian American scientists to lawyers who are knowledgeable about such accusations. In the six months before officially launching the project, the group made more than half a dozen referrals, says Yang.

There is concern that anti-China rhetoric and antagonism towards foreign researchers will get worse with an economic downturn in the United States caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The first cases of the coronavirus were detected in China, and Trump and his administration have blamed the country for causing the pandemic.