

The Budget and science: FASTS

Australia's peak body for scientists and technologists has expressed cautious optimism about the science Budget.

Dr David Denham, acting President of the Federation of Australian Scientific and Technological Societies (FASTS), said that scientists had some concerns going into the Budget.

"We were worried about CSIRO and the affect of reforms in the higher education sector, and whether funding promised under the "Backing Australia's Ability" package would be delivered on time and in full," he said.

"On first examination, the Budget delivers a small increase in overall funding for science, and continues the next tranche of funding for the Australian Research Council and the Cooperative Research Centres Program beyond the timeline of BAA, so this is positive.

"While CSIRO will be funded for one year instead of its normal three years, the Government has assured us that this is to allow a series of reviews and inquiries to be completed," he said.

"FASTS will take a close interest in the reviews.

"We welcome a small funding increase for CSIRO. This body should now be allowed a period of stability and certainty - it's been through tough times recently of change, revamp and inquiry."

Dr Denham supported the additional \$61 million for Geoscience Australia to boost research in Australia's offshore petroleum basins.

He also welcomed support for the rebuilding of Mt Stromlo, though he was surprised by the modest dollars involved. He understands that the Budget announcement has not closed the door on further Commonwealth funding for the rebuilding package.

The biggest unknown from the Budget is how the higher education reforms will affect science. Dr Denham noted the funding boost for the tertiary education sector as welcome and overdue, and said it will go some way to restoring the cuts made by the Government since 1996.

"The package is heavily back-loaded, with only \$69 million due before the next Federal election, so relief for Australia's universities is still on the horizon.

"It's difficult to predict how science will be affected by the new arrangements," he said.

"Australia's long-term future is inextricably linked to our investment in science and research, but it is expensive to teach, and expensive to conduct research. Will universities have the incentives to encourage them to be active in these areas?"

FASTS also welcomed the expanded number of places for teachers, but also

called for science and mathematics to be made a specific National Priority cluster.

The Budget partially addresses the issue of the research funding "cliff" - what happens in 2006 when BAA funding has run its course - through pipeline measures for continuing the expanded funding of the ARC, the Cooperative Research centres Program and the START Program.

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