



Recent changes in the political landscape in Northern Europe have brought some new policies that are less supportive of science and education than previously. This is a major shift for Denmark and Finland, which have until now invested 3% of GDP in research and development. Time will tell whether such research and education cuts are a mere bleep on these countries record, or whether they will bear long-term consequences.

Research and education budgets in shambles in Denmark and Finland



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Accession to power of right-wing governments could hamper progress towards a knowledge-based economy

Public spending for research and education has been curtailed in many countries across Europe as a result of the recession. Until now Nordic countries or Germany avoided such cuts, according to a 2013 [EU report](#) examining the impact of the financial crisis on research and innovation. However, policies depend on politics. And newly formed centre-right governments in Denmark and Finland are adopting radical new policies. As a result, research and education budgets have now come under

threat.

What is most striking is that these Nordic countries are traditionally supportive of research and education. They are among the few nations in Europe that have reached the target to allocate [3% of their countries' GDP](#) to research and development. In this article, [EuroScientist](#) looks at the possible repercussions, should governments turn their back on science, neglecting its fundamental role in society.

Recent elections outcome

Populist right-wing parties have gained large support in the latest elections in Finland and Denmark. Although not a governing party, the Danske Folkeparti is the [second largest party](#) in the Danish parliament. This means they are likely to have a great influence over the minority government of the Danish liberal party Venstre.

Similarly, in Finland, the centre-led [government](#) consisting of three parties including the right-wing Finns Party. Meanwhile, elsewhere in Europe, right-wing parties are also increasingly [gaining support](#). In Poland, the government is now led by the party Law and Justice (PiS). And the most recent regional elections in France resulted in large gains for the extreme right-wing party Front National.

However, it is in Denmark and Finland that a shift in research policy is most likely to be felt. Indeed, the new governments in these countries appear to value science less than their predecessors.

Policy shift

In Denmark, the governing liberal party [announced in September](#) this year to reduce the budget for research by about DKK1.4 billion (€190 million) to DKK20.6 (€2.8) billion, a cut of about 6.3 % compared to 2015. As a result, public sector spending for R&D will likely decrease to about 1.01% of GDP compared to 1.08% in 2014. Similarly, in Finland, a [governmental proposal](#) suggests a cut of about 9% of the overall research budget, representing €140 million in 2016 compared to 2015.

The Danish proposal constitutes "a substantial cut," says Niels Mejlgaard, director of the Danish Centre for Studies in Research and Research Policies at [Aarhus University](#). As R&D spending in the private sector is also decreasing, "this is even more discouraging," Mejlgaard points out. In parallel, the budget for higher education will also be decreased by 2% of the current budget in each of the next four years, he explains.

While public funding for science and education has already decreased in Finland since 2011, "the speed and scale [of the budget cuts] of the current government is unprecedented," says Petri Koikkalainen, political scientist at the [University of Lapland](#) in Rovaniemi and chair of the [Finnish Union for University Researchers and Teachers](#). Proposed cuts in education, are "something we don't have any experience of," he adds.

But what is the agenda behind this new austerity science policy? Previously, countries suffering from the economic downturn drastically cut their science budgets. That's the case of [Spain](#), [Greece](#) and [Romania](#).

As far as these Nordic countries are concerned, governments use similar arguments. “Denmark has suffered an economic setback without adjusting research expenditures”, a [position paper](#) by the new Danish government argues. By comparison, in Finland, the financial crisis exacerbated by the impacts of the downfall of Nokia and consequent structural changes in the economy have great impact on the Finnish economy,” says Terttu Luukkonen, senior fellow of the [Research Institute of the Finnish Economy](#) in Helsinki. “It’s all related to the economic situation,” she says.

However, “research should be seen as a way to emerge from economic difficulties not as a source of savings in austerity regimes,” says Luke Georghiou, professor of science and technology policy and management at [Manchester Business School](#), UK. He has summed up his findings in a recent [advice paper](#) about the value of research, written for the European Commission.

Dealing with the consequences

The consequences from the budget cuts in Finland and Denmark are manifold. In the short run, there will be “quite dramatic staff reductions in Danish universities,” Mejlgaard says. This will also happen in Finland, according to Koikkalainen. Moreover, Finnish universities will have to “merge faculties, re-write BA, MA, and doctoral programmes, reorganise research and re-consider teaching methods,” Koikkalainen says. “It is a step back,” he adds.

As both countries have previously greatly fostered young researchers early in their career, these may be hit particularly hard. “There may be a lost generation,” Mejlgaard points out. In Finland, “brain drain is a real possibility,” Koikkalainen fears. Indeed, young researchers may increasingly find it difficult to pursue an academic career in their countries, as the cuts are likely to lead to the [closure of many jobs](#) in academia. Besides, “people are worried about whether there is a rejection of the notion of Finland as a highly-developed technological economy,” Koikkalainen stresses.

In Denmark, the problem is that the current government depends on parties that put emphasis on other issues than science, such as tax cuts, welfare services or border protection, Mejlgaard notes. “This puts the government in a hard position,” he says. But “trade-offs in political attention neglect the inter-relatedness of issues. If we want to [solve migration problems](#), we need knowledge,” he adds. Decreasing public expenditure for R&D would thus affect the quality of research and the role of knowledge in society in the long run.

Policies that do not favour investment in science go against the strong scientific consensus that the rate of return from public funded research is high. While most politicians recognise this perspective, “some believe erroneously that the benefits take longer to materialise than their own electoral cycles. They fail to recognise the key role of research in training people and creating absorptive capacity for innovative ideas,” says Georghiou.

Mejlgaard also points at science’s role to provide evidence-based advice to policy. He questions whether Denmark has “the capacity to do so based on reduced funding.” By contrast in Finland, Luukkonen believes, the Finnish centre party-led government does not seem to support evidence-based policy. The government’s neglect in science is for example reflected in the fact that it has not yet appointed a new [research and innovation council](#), which is “an important body to agree on R&D policy,” she says.

Isolated cases, no definite trend

From a European perspective, the signals sent from these policy changes are not very encouraging. These national policies could suffer from the fact that the message from the EU is “not always clear,” says Bart Verspagen, professor of international economics at [Maastricht University](#), The Netherlands. On the one hand, there is clearly a push from policy makers in Brussels “that Europe should become a knowledge-based society.” At the same time, they want countries to save money to meet the debt criteria, he says.

Still, Mejlgaard is hesitant to see a European trend. Countries such as [Germany](#) or [Norway](#) have recently announced increases in budgets for research and education, for example.

By contrast, in Poland, so far the newly elected right-wing government does not appear interested in tackling the science budget in the first place. “I would not expect major cuts. Current research spending in Poland is on embarrassingly low level already,” says Piotr Bentkowski of the Polish grassroots-initiative [Citizens of Academia](#). In his view, that could be because the current science minister is not a member of the governing party Law and Justice.

In light of economic and political pressures, it remains to be seen whether right-wing politicians in power elsewhere in Europe introduce policies questioning science’s fundamental role in society.

Constanze Böttcher

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