

# The Australian

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## The GFC a blessing for research

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**WITH the shockwaves of the financial crisis of 2008 still making their way across the world, a new reality in most developed nations is less government support for research.**

In particular, a wave of austerity across Europe is bringing about substantial cuts to government research funding.

This is already being noticed in Australia, where several bilateral agreements are unable to be sustained because counterparts in Europe no longer have the means with which to support the engagement.

It is clear that many researchers in Europe, in particular emerging talents, are about to encounter a lengthy period in which research funding will become increasingly scarce.

Similar situations are developing in the US.

Anecdotal evidence would suggest that, increasingly, European and American researchers are approaching their Australian colleagues to inquire as to the prospect of relocating here, a consequence of domestic belt-tightening.

While this bleak reality may not bode well for science, it may be of huge benefit to the strengthening of Australia's research workforce (a point mentioned only in passing in the recent government strategy paper, Research Skills for an Innovative Future), which is facing shortages due to the disparity between the numbers of senior researchers headed towards retirement and early career researchers entering the system.

This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for Australia to effect a brain gain. By being able to better maintain support for research, Australia can become a prime destination for discouraged researchers from other Western nations.

No other nation outside of Europe or North America can compete with the options that Australia can provide to a researcher seeking to further their research careers.

Other nations that one might consider are too small to cater for the broad spectrum of global research that is conducted in Australia or are culturally quite dissimilar to the West.

All of this leads to the obvious question: how can Australia take advantage of this situation?

While it may be difficult at present to fund programs designed explicitly to target the recruitment of overseas researchers, there are steps that may be taken to facilitate the natural flow of researchers from abroad that do not require new funds.

For example, encouraging short to medium-length stays for conferences, lab visits, sabbaticals and so on could be an effective strategy. When it comes to mobility, most professionals are hindered by inertia.

For this reason it is important to establish an environment that makes it straightforward for researchers to visit Australia, which in turn leads to decisions about moving here more permanently.

If Australia is to address its present and future shortfalls in research workforce capacity, then initiatives such as this can contribute to the future of the nation.

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