Science and the next coalition

No matter what form the next government takes, budget cuts will be made. Adam Smith finds out how research funding could be saved—or even raised.

Coalition is a dirty word for the Conservatives and Labour: both are gunning for a majority in next week’s election. But if pollsters are to be believed, the UK is heading for another government with no single party holding power—and a potentially more complex one than the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition of recent years. Any government will be led by one of the two main parties, and neither has promised to protect the research budget.

This suggests that science could be in the line of fire, unlike in 2010. By this point in the election campaign five years ago, the business secretary Peter Mandelson had promised to protect research if Labour won. Even so, spending on R&D may survive or even increase. Not because of any specific policy announcement, but because of a subtle change in Whitehall bean counting.

In September 2014, R&D was reclassified from current spending to capital investment in the national accounts. And although all parties are promising to make cuts, Labour and the Lib Dems are clear that their sights are aimed at current spending. They will not cut, and may increase, funding for capital, which is good news for R&D if they end up in coalition.

Treasury officials are still working out what is covered by the reclassification. But presuming that they answer that question in time for the spending review later this year, publicly funded R&D could be saved. Any government could even spend more on research without affecting its attempts to shrink the deficit. However, this trick may not be the shield that researchers are looking for: the Conservatives’ plans make them less likely to borrow the money needed to invest in research, and Labour’s plans incur debt, which makes borrowing for investment harder in the long run.

In addition to spending, the Royal Society president Paul Nurse’s review of the research councils will be top of the incoming science minister’s inbox. The deadline for submissions has now passed and, as with the triennial review, few respondents are advocating major structural change. Nurse is widely expected to propose a way for the research councils’ budget to be top sliced to fund work of national importance, and for the councils to be restructured accordingly. The Royal Society has called for a body to be established to set the national priorities, which is a task that has been partly taken on in recent years by Mark Walport, the government’s chief scientific adviser.

Whatever Nurse recommends will be subject to political interpretation, though. Walport has grown close to chancellor George Osborne. In the absence of strong leadership in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, Walport and Osborne are taking strategic decisions in research policy. This may continue with another five years of Osborne as chancellor. A Labour-led government, however, may choose to interpret Nurse’s findings differently, especially if Liam Byrne becomes the science minister.

Europe is also expected to be high on the incoming government’s priority list, particularly if that government is led by the Conservatives.

As the European Union provided €4.3 billion to UK researchers from 2007 to 2013, a sense of growing public and political scepticism of the EU is wor-
One-minute manifestos

*Research Fortnight* reporters give their verdicts on what each of the major parties has to offer to research and innovation.

**Liberal spenders**

The Liberal Democrats are the only one of the three main parties to promise to protect science funding in the next parliament. Having defended austerity for five years, they are ready to loosen the purse strings a little.

Former acting leader Vince Cable has personally committed to maintaining a ring fence around the science budget and to increasing capital and revenue spending on research at least in line with inflation.

The Lib Dems’ science credentials are further boosted by Team Science, a group of six of their parliamentary candidates who have promised to raise the topic of science while campaigning door to door.

Five years ago, BBC TV producer Judith Bunting was stuffing envelopes for Cable in his campaign to be re-elected as the sitting MP for Twickenham. Bunting is now the candidate for Newbury, home to several hi-tech businesses. “I joined the party just after the last election,” she says. “I thought the coalition was one of the bravest things that any party had done for a long time—we put the country before the party.”

Her colleague Lucy Care is a former engineer running in Derby North, where she has been a councillor for more than 20 years. She says it makes sense to talk about science because it is so much a part of the economy: “In Derby people really understand the links between a company like Rolls-Royce and local wealth creation.”

But the reality is that the polls are not looking good for the Lib Dems. “It’ll be a difficult election,” mumbles Simon Wright, a former maths teacher who is seeking re-election as MP for Norwich South.

**SNP: a national focus**

The Scottish National Party has been pitching its anti-austerity manifesto, saying it is the only one of the main parties to offer such an alternative. Yet in government, with a few exceptions, it has not been so radical.

“Free university is a major issue for us,” says Carol Monaghan, a physics teacher standing for the SNP in Glasgow North West, referring to the tuition fee policy north of the border. But that is not enough, she adds. Two of her former pupils work at Cern, the European particle physics laboratory based near Geneva, but as a nationalist Monaghan wants to build opportunities closer to home. “It’s all well and good saying we’ve got a world-class university system in Scotland, but what plans do we have for people after university?”

Monaghan surveys a map pinned to the wall in her constituency office and points out the slums and the shipyards. Monaghan’s is a poor area, a previously safe Labour seat that could tip to the SNP in May.

Having watched companies including Motorola and Merck shut down their R&D operations in Scotland, she says she’s fighting for jobs and employment that can only come with a scientifically skilled workforce. Her party’s answer is to continue funding Scotland’s innovation centres and to seek the power to set the nation’s own separate tax regime to encourage investment in Scotland, including in R&D.

Despite losing the referendum on independence last year, the SNP’s plans for research and innovation are focused on Scotland, not the UK system.

If polls are to be believed, the party is poised to scoop a higher number of seats in Westminster than ever before and could help to form, or at least prop up, a possible Labour-led government.

**Tories stand by their record**

The Conservative manifesto gives little indication of the party’s plans for research. It highlights that the coalition ring-fenced the science budget in this parliament, but does not outline plans for the budget in the next.

Considerable space is devoted to research nonetheless, but much of it is used to remind voters of the achievements of the coalition—for example, the allocation of £6.9 billion in capital funding up to 2021.

The party says it would push for a deal at the UN Climate Change Conference in Paris this year that “keeps the goal of limiting global warming to two degrees firmly in reach”. At the same time, it would promote “significant expansion” in the exploitation of natural gas, including through fracking, as well as nuclear technologies. It pledges support for renewable technologies “that clearly represent value for money”.

The manifesto sets out plans for regional science investment, saying the party would “back scientific and technical strengths by creating new institutions”, although whether this means additional institutions to those already announced is not clear.

It also says that the Conservatives would direct further resources towards David Willetts’s eight great technologies, “support a science-led approach on genetically modified crops and pesticides” and commit to implementing the recommendations of the Innovative Medicines and Medical Technology Review.
In addition, the party says it would introduce a teaching excellence framework for universities and would take further measures against extremism on campuses.

**Plaid’s plans for universities**

Wales’s pro-independence party continues to reject tuition fees, pledging to reduce them to zero for students at Welsh universities in “target groups” or “studying subjects vital to the Welsh economy”. Already, Welsh students pay only £3,500 in tuition wherever they study in the UK, with any shortfall paid by the Welsh Assembly.

It also pledges more research capacity and funding for universities, without saying where the money will come from. One clue may lie in the fact that the party is against nuclear weapons and opposes the renewal of the Trident nuclear deterrent. It’s estimated that discontinuing Trident would save about £100bn over 30 years.

Similarly to the SNP, Plaid Cymru seeks more control over migration policy,pledging to reinstate the post-study work visa for graduates of Welsh universities.

The manifesto promises to check the power of corporations (in Europe and in the NHS, for example), but education spokesman Simon Thomas says universities should work more closely with industry.

Plaid’s leader Leanne Wood may yet be Ed Miliband’s kingmaker on 7 May. The Welsh party’s best-case result of five seats is far below the SNP’s 55, but every MP will be critical if the Labour leader is to become prime minister.

**Greens: the Marmite party**

The Green Party has always had a mixed relationship with researchers. It is strictly mainstream when it comes to climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss, which it highlights as priority research areas. But if your work involves security, defence or certain areas of biology, Green policies to reduce funding for military research and research involving animals may not be welcome.

The Greens pledge to stop some animal experiments immediately, including non-medical experiments and the breeding of genetically altered animals. However, the party pledges to ensure the publication of all findings of animal research, including negative findings.

The Greens also say they would prevent the patenting of genes and living organisms, and ensure that basic research is not “controlled by large corporations”.

Perhaps related to that last point is a pledge to double public spending on R&D from 0.5 to 1 per cent of GDP. This would involve an extra £0.9bn in 2015, with £4.7bn extra being spent by 2019.

The party also seeks to address the structure of the institutions in receipt of government R&D spending: only vice-chancellors and bureaucrats benefit from the system as it stands, the manifesto says.

The manifesto says that “the fundamental purpose of universities should be to promote critical enquiry, social innovation and cultural renewal” but that this has been sidelined in the commercialisation of higher education.

The party would end undergraduate tuition fees, reintroduce student grants and the block grant to universities, and support the Fair Pay Campus campaign.

The Greens have one MP (Caroline Lucas, Brighton) and are expected to pick up one more seat.

**Ukip speaks up for science**

The UK Independence Party’s manifesto contains some surprises. It pledges that students of science, technology, engineering and maths subjects will not have to repay their tuition fees if they work in their discipline for at least five years after graduating. Ukip will adjust the number of subjects funded to allow for greater uptake.

Ukip’s manifesto also includes a pledge to invest an extra £130 million in dementia research by 2017, and reiterates its support for research into GM food. It also pledges to tightly regulate animal testing.

The party has two MPs (Douglas Carswell and Mark Reckless) and is expected to at least double that number.

**Tight-lipped Labour**

In contrast to 2010, Labour is making just one firm commitment in higher education or science policy. It pledges to cut tuition fees to £6,000 a year, which would be paid for by raising tax on pension contributions for high earners and a clampdown on tax avoidance.

The manifesto makes no commitment to protecting the science budget from cuts. The word “science” crops up only three times and “research” twice.

It promises “a new long-term funding policy framework for science and innovation” but gives little detail about this. Universities are praised for forming “strong links with industry and creating hi-tech clusters”.

Elsewhere, it commits to “the biggest devolution of power to our English city and county regions in 100 years”, including through the transfer of powers over economic development, skills and business support.

Green technology is given a special mention, and the Green Investment Bank is promised additional powers to boost its capacity for investment.

Many sitting Labour MPs have been targeted by Ukip, and the party is conflicted on where it stands on immigration. The manifesto takes a slightly tough-sounding tone but stresses the importance of “welcoming overseas university students who bring billions into Britain”.

On research-related issues, it is clear that there is little to choose between Labour and the Conservatives.

*Reports by James Brooks, James Field, Craig Nicholson and Adam Smith.*
Constructive campaign

Challengers for a safe Conservative seat are campaigning on issues rather than personalities. Is it because each has a strong link to research? Miriam Frankel reports.

“They seem like very nice people,” says Kate Prendergast, the Green candidate for Wantage in Oxfordshire, when talking about her competitors for this safe Conservative seat. Such uncharacteristic generosity in an otherwise highly combative political system could partly be because two of her rivals are working scientists. Prendergast herself has a PhD in archaeology.

“We are all honest folk, pursuing our goals,” says Stephen Webb, the candidate for Labour and a physicist: “I think we are all a bit less outspoken and aggressive than other politicians, but I don’t think the public look on that as a negative thing,” he adds. Lee Upcraft, the candidate for the UK Independence Party, is also a physicist. The Liberal Democrats’ Alex Meredith is a solicitor specialising in renewable energy.

A contest between researchers is fitting, as the constituency of Wantage is home to Didcot and many scientists who work at some of the UK’s most important scientific infrastructure: the Rutherford Appleton Laboratory, Diamond Light Source and Joint European Torus fusion facility.

In contrast to the incumbent MP Ed Vaizey, each of the challengers is passionate about science. And it is a subject on which there is some agreement. For example, Upcraft and Webb agree that it is crucial for the budget for science capital expenditure to be part of an overall ring-fenced science budget. “The government priority areas for the capital budget have created a lot of waste, because you can’t operate a capital-fund piece of kit unless you’ve got people and resources to run it and keep it up to date,” says Webb.

Even the arguments are conducted with something like common-room civility. Upcraft, for example, wants to scrap green subsidies and invest more in fossil fuel and nuclear energy. He is especially excited about nuclear fusion and believes that the other parties’ push for renewables is “making energy unaffordable” for more than two million people “who can’t afford to heat their homes”.

In contrast, the Lib Dems and Greens are fiercely opposed to nuclear solutions. Prendergast says: “The evidence is that renewables are keeping the price down very significantly” and there is too much subsidy going into the fossil fuels industry. “Renewables is the sector of the future. We have to provide incentives for people to move away from fossil fuel.”

Whereas Webb believes that more immigration can help solve problems such as staff shortages in the NHS, Upcraft claims that high levels of immigration are the root of many more problems. “It is no wonder that young people struggle to find local houses—we have never built enough and will never build enough to cope with 300,000 immigrants a year.”

However, Upcraft points out that, unlike for most other UKip members, immigration is not the issue closest to his heart: that honour belongs to energy policy. Moreover, some of the more extreme views on immigration held by certain members of the party made him unsure about joining two years ago. “I thought: ‘Do I want to tarnish myself with that potential negativity?’ But ultimately you’ve got to be in it to change things—to show that there are sensible people in the party.”

Upcraft emphasises that UKip is welcoming to skilled migrants, but says a misconception that the party’s wish to limit immigration is based on “racial characteristics” has “tarnished our reputation among a lot of the scientific community who think that open interaction is good for science”.

When asked whether open borders wouldn’t be better for science, Upcraft, who spent two years working at L’École Polytechnique in France, has an imaginative answer: “Science is an intellectual pursuit. Does it really have to be done with bodies on the ground? A lot of science is now done collaboratively over the internet.” He also believes that some of the £20 billion that the UK pays into the European Union each year could be used for science if the UK leaves the EU.

Each of the candidates says that science rarely comes up in doorstep discussions. Of more pressing concern are the NHS and housing, and here again there seems to be more convergence in their opinions.

Although Wantage will have an extra 20,000 homes built in the next five years, the candidates acknowledge that constituents are worried about whether the existing infrastructure, such as roads, can support such expansion. They are also concerned about the pressure on schools and the local NHS hospital, which is struggling with more temporary staff and longer queues.

With a week to go before polling day, all the candidates are taking time off from work to challenge Vaizey. But with an 8,000 majority, the Conservative incumbent is expected to retain his seat. His challengers may need to wait a while longer to achieve their dreams of leaving the day job for a career in politics.
`I’m not going to spell out the detail’

Does Labour have a science plan? Miriam Frankel finds the shadow business secretary Chuka Umunna unwilling to get into specifics.

Can you confirm whether a Labour government would protect the research budget?
We will be announcing the exact funding framework for the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills in the chancellor’s first budget if we are elected. In office, we had a 10-year funding framework for science and we have committed to ensuring that we put in a long-term funding framework for science and innovation in the next parliament, although I’m not in a position to give exact details. We’ve been clear that all our commitments are properly funded and do not entail additional borrowing.

Should you decide to protect the ring fence, would the capital budget be inside it?
I am not going to pass any comments on any ring fences that may or may not be applied. We have a different fiscal framework from the Conservatives, however. If they were re-elected, the Office for Budget Responsibility has been very clear that the scale of the cuts in the first three years of parliament would be twice as big as those in any year of this parliament. And given that BIS is an unprotected department, you are looking at about 40 per cent cuts. The research and science community will need to reflect on that when deciding whom to throw their support behind in this election. Also, if we end up in a situation where we come out of the European Union, that will obviously put EU funding for science in jeopardy.

But chancellor George Osborne has so far protected the science budget. How committed is the shadow chancellor Ed Balls to science?
Osborne might say that about the science budget, but of course each of the Whitehall departments has R&D and science spending that will see cuts. Balls has a huge commitment to science. He was working closely with Gordon Brown, for whom science was a real priority, during Brown’s time as chancellor.

How committed are you to convincing Balls that open borders are crucial to research?
We’ve been very clear that we are committed to this. Higher education is one of our biggest exports—why jeopardise it? Many vice-chancellors have told me about the huge damage that the home secretary Theresa May has done to research and higher education institutions more broadly, sending a message that the UK doesn’t want people with new ideas and that we’re closed for business. One of the biggest threats facing the science community, I think, would be another five years of May.

Do you want to bring back the post-study work visa?
We need to be sensible. There’s no point having people coming over here and benefiting from learning and producing new ideas, only to go home because we’ve kicked them out of the country. I am not commenting on that specifically, but we need a sensible overall approach.

Do you agree with complaints that the recent drip-feed of capital has caused instability and led to the politicisation of research funding?
We subscribe to the Haldane principle, of course. But like I said, I’m not going to spell out what the detail of the BIS budget would be.

Do you think the coalition has struck a good balance between basic research and more instrumental work?
Well, the coalition set out the eight great technologies, but we’re getting into the funding thing again. I would just create more uncertainty by speculating.

What about the Research Excellence Framework, which is one of the mechanisms that has allowed this to happen—would you like to keep that?
Again, you are taking me into a level of detail that I don’t want to comment on.

If you could have any role in the next cabinet except BIS secretary, what would it be?
I’m not going there. The exact composition of the next government would be an issue for Ed Miliband.

Do you have a favourite scientist from the past?
That’s a really good question. No. But I’ll tell you when I realised the importance of the way society is changing with regard to innovation: it was when I got my first computer, which was an Acorn Electron. I was just five or six.
Green Party gets wise

Support for the Greens is high among academics and students. As James Field reports, this may be partly because they want to bin the Research Excellence Framework.

Philosopher Rupert Read, the Green Party’s candidate for Cambridge, is clear on what the party stands for: an end to what he calls the marketisation of universities and an end to the Research Excellence Framework (REF). Business influence, too, will need to be moderated and companies made subject to freedom of information. But the paradox for someone so clearly of the left is that he is willing to name-check Friedrich Hayek, one of the founders of neoclassical economics.

Hayek and his later disciples, such as the Institute of Economic Affairs think tank, succeeded in making centre-right economics, once relatively marginal, the mainstream. And that is the trick that Read would like to be repeated by the green think tank Green House, which he helps to coordinate. “They [the right] were belea-guered, miles from influence, but they went on a long march and succeeded,” says Read, who teaches philosophy at the University of East Anglia.

One of the biggest targets that the Greens have in their sights is the unquestioning pursuit of economic growth as a societal good—the idea, accepted by almost all other parties, that growth and progress are the same thing and that if economies didn’t always grow by a few percentage points every year then society would be worse off.

“We think that people still have very little idea of what is meant by living in a world that is not subject to a growth imperative,” says Read. He describes the growth agenda as a “historic aberration” and refers to the work of green economist Herman Daly, one of the founders of a school of thought called steady-state economics. This is about trying to envision what an economy, society and environment would look like without constant growth.

On campus, the Greens are appealing to areas where pressure is greatest, such as the gradual erosion of autonomy that has come with the introduction of fees and the demands of the REF, although Read is not against every aspect of the assessment exercise: “If it becomes a way to support public intellectuals, it will be a good thing,” he says. However, he is concerned that it may just become another economic pressure rather than something that instils a genuine sense of responsibility. “Academics are ground down,” he says, adding that the Green Party’s manifesto for Cambridge talks of replacing the REF with a “supportive development strategy”.

Greater involvement of companies, especially multinationals, is also creating pressures in the system that need to be released, says Read. That is one reason why the party pledges to double the public share of research spending to 1 per cent of GDP over 10 years. “We need universities that are outward facing, but not subjected to brutal commercial imperatives,” he says. “We need them to think beyond knowledge, data and information—to think about wis-dom.” As things stand, says Read: “I don’t think there are any healthy universities in the country.”

One area of Green policy that has remained unchanged since the party’s founding days is its opposition to what philosophers and sociologists call “scientism”. This is the idea, crudely put, that scientists know best: that they are best placed to solve problems because they work inside the scientific method, which to date remains the only known verifiable system for judging whether an idea or an intervention is true or effective.

“The idea that all advances in our knowledge, let alone innovation or technology, must spring from the scientific base is false,” Read says. “I have no problem with science, but science is not the only worthwhile way of understanding things. We also need philosophy and other kinds of thinking—other kinds of understanding.”

Read would rather see politicians being held to account for their rationality and the methods they use to make decisions rather than for their adherence to scientific advice. This, he says, can only come about if we don’t restrict the arena of knowledge to science.

That partly explains why Read is not concerned about the number of scientists in government. He claims the idea that they are underrepresented has been exaggerated, not least by the sitting MP for Cambridge and Read’s opponent, the Liberal Democrat Julian Huppert. “You can’t have a fully evidence-based politics,” Read says. “It wouldn’t see far enough into the future.”

Read concedes that the world may not yet be ready for a political party that is so contrary to the mainstream. He says that he would, of course, like to hunker down and spend a generation trying to change the existing hegemony, sparing his party many of the sideswipes it receives in the media and elsewhere. “But the reason I haven’t given up on pursuing things through the Green Party,” he says, “is that the timetable is so urgent and the world situation so desperate.”
Judge us on our record, says Willetts

The Conservative Party’s 2015 manifesto doesn’t rule out cuts to science. Craig Nicholson asks David Willetts what researchers would gain by voting Conservative.

The Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats are “well disposed towards science and technology”, and the country doesn’t gain by pretending there are differences where none exist, says David Willetts, who was the Conservative minister for universities and science from May 2010 to July 2014.

Willetts’s generosity towards his political opponents is characteristic of a man who is popular among academic leaders, partly because he understood their needs and fought for their interests. But it also raises an obvious question: what, then, is distinctive about Conservative research policies? And will the party again appoint someone with Willetts’s clout to the universities portfolio?

Neither of the two ministers who share the role now, cities minister Greg Clark and life sciences minister George Freeman, has yet proved to be in Willetts’s league.

Total UK public funding for R&D is calculated by the campaign group Science is Vital to have dropped below 0.5 per cent of GDP in this parliament, the lowest proportion in the G8 group of the world’s largest economies. Willetts says he always made the case for more R&D spending and continues to do so, but adds that: “The Treasury is besieged with people coming to it arguing that there is a high rate of return on a particular proposition.”

Willetts says that the Conservative bid for the science vote rests on the party’s record as part of the coalition. He lists the ring-fenced science budget and the delivery of the Catapult centres as “distinctive Conservative contributions to science and technology policy”. But it could be said that Labour, too, prioritised science and innovation for most of its last period in government.

Neither of the two biggest parties has set out detailed plans for the science budget. However, the Conservatives have pledged £6.9 billion in science capital expenditure up to 2021, whereas Labour has said only that it will introduce a long-term funding policy framework.

Another difference is Labour’s pledge to reduce undergraduate tuition fees to £6,000 a year from the £9,000 a year to which they were raised by the coalition government. Willetts says that if a Labour minister for science and universities ends up talking to a Labour chancellor after the May election, they will first have to ask for billions of pounds “just to get back to where they started with university funding”. He adds: “Then coming to the Treasury and asking secondly for more money for science and technology will be harder.”

Labour has also pledged to set up a national infrastructure commission “to assess how best to meet Britain’s infrastructure needs”. Willetts says he “hears rumblings” among researchers about how capital spending is allocated, adding that “clearly people have to feel they’re getting a fair crack of the whip”. However, he says that decisions about projects involving significant public investment do have to be taken by ministers, albeit acting on expert advice. He says it is important to act quickly to ensure that burgeoning expertise remains in the UK, but that this kind of “seed funding” must then be expanded to other areas through a “hub and spoke” model.

The parties differ on the UK’s relationship with the European Union, with the Conservatives promising a referendum on the UK’s membership in 2017, preceded by attempts at reform. Willetts, who was a candidate for a European commissioner role, says he thinks it is “massively in the UK’s interest to remain in the EU” but that there are genuine concerns about how Europe functions. “The kind of reforms that David Cameron wants to negotiate would be in the interests of Europe as a whole, making it more flexible and more competitive,” he says.

Freeman, who spent 15 years working in the life sciences before being elected as MP for Mid Norfolk in 2010, goes further. He talks of “huge concerns” about “directives and regulations on stem cells, data, clinical trials, regenerative medicine, agricultural genetics and technology”, and says he sees opportunities for innovation beyond those offered by the EU, namely in public procurement at home and in emerging economies.

Science is becoming increasingly important in elections, Willetts says. This is partly because of the growing number of people who are in some way involved and partly because, “thank heavens”, there is more recognition that science is “a crucial part” of how the UK sees itself.

He describes the public campaigning to protect research spending in the summer of 2010, when cuts to the science budget in cash terms were a real possibility, as fantastic. “The more scientists and researchers making those arguments, the better,” he says.

‘Science is becoming increasingly important in elections.’


Next coalition from Cover

Eying UK researchers. An in-out referendum in 2017 is a flagship Conservative policy. The Lib Dems may have to agree if they join the Tories again, but really both they and Labour want a referendum only if Brussels seeks changes to its relationship with member states—the president of the European Commission has ruled this out during his term, which ends in 2019.

Meanwhile, university vice-chancellors, like business bosses, are not taking their chances and are planning a pro-EU campaign. Julia Goodfellow, the vice-chancellor of the University of Kent, which is self-styled as “the UK’s European university”, is likely to lead the charge. Goodfellow is due to take over the presidency of Universities UK in August, and the pro-EU lobbying is “one reason why she got elected to that job”, claims a former adviser to Labour on higher education.

One issue that will continue to dominate, whoever wins, is immigration—not least if the UK Independence Party wins its predicted four seats and continues to grab the headlines.

Labour is split on immigration, even on its shadow front bench: Ed Balls said he supported the “controls on immigration” message that was printed on an official Labour mug, but shadow ministers Chuka Umunna and Shabana Mahmood were among those who opposed it. The Scottish National Party (SNP) and Plaid Cymru also want an end to any strong anti-immigration language and would like the post-study work visa reinstated for Scotland and Wales.

Universities remain concerned that anti-immigration rhetoric is among the reasons for sharp falls in international students coming to the UK, especially from India. They lobbied for their own visa route for exceptionally talented academics, but the take-up of this has been dire. They are not likely to get far with any government after 7 May, but one change they will hope for is the removal of students from the net migration target, which the Lib Dems and even Ukip have pledged. Labour has promised to scrap the target altogether.

Another five years of a Conservative-led government could only result in the borders being tightened. The party wanted to reduce net migration to the tens of thousands by 2015 but the latest figure, from September 2014, was 298,000.

So immigration, the EU and the research budget will all be on the desk of the next science and universities minister (or ministers). But who gets that role depends on internal party politics as much as the election result. Greg Clark for the Conservatives is not half as exciting as David Willetts and is not linked to any substantial policy development on research and universities. And Liam Byrne for Labour is hardly owed a job: Labour’s opponents have taken every opportunity to attack the party over the flippant letter that the ex-Treasury minister Byrne left in 2010 to say there was no money.

The composition of the government that will have to decide research spending and immigration policy is even vaguer. In the simplest scenario, the Lib Dems would hold some or most of their vote and return to govern with the Conservatives, perhaps in a bigger coalition including Northern Ireland’s Democratic Unionist Party.

Alternatively, the Lib Dems might want to work in coalition with a resurgent Labour, particularly as both parties agree that cuts to public spending now need to be slowed down.

If the Lib Dem vote collapses and the SNP wipes Labour out of Scotland as predicted, the party leaders’ rhetoric points to a Labour-led minority government with decisions made on an issue-by-issue basis. The SNP will bargain hard. For example, it could ask for more of the research budget for Scottish priorities in exchange for support for Labour’s plan to reduce fees to £6,000.

The realisation of this policy could make a Labour-led government very unpopular with universities and academics. If the policy turns out not to be fully funded and university income drops as a result, vice-chancellors will need to pinch money from somewhere. They would surely cut research and facilities, especially planned ones. Under renewed pressure to attract more students, with each worth less than before, vice-chancellors could seek efficiencies not in teaching but in research—and people in the humanities fear they would bear the brunt.

In any event, and assuming no second election, the Conservatives or Labour will take control of the nation’s accounts. The choice matters: the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) has described the parties’ differences on spending as greater than at any time since at least 1992.

Both parties pledge to cut public spending. The difference is the degree of cuts and whether taxes need to rise.

In an attempt to avoid raising taxes, the Conservatives would suck tens of billions from public spending over the next three years. Labour says it will cut more slowly, and may need to tax more, but its precise plans are unclear. Cuts to departments are inevitable: the IFS says even the self-proclaimed anti-austerity SNP would need to cut funding from unprotected departments. Even a left-wing partnership implies more hard times, although voters are in the dark about exactly what would happen.

So perhaps the only certainty is the government’s research budget itself. None of the parties is likely to cut public investment, and if science finds a home in that column of the national accounts then it could be spared regardless of who occupies Whitehall and number 10.