

# Allocating funds for scientific research

Normally big debates about science funding occur in the run up to a comprehensive spending review (CSR), but the economic downturn facing the UK has made policymakers re-think their strategy for research funding. The big questions being debated are about the overall level of spending and if it should be focused more clearly on certain areas.

The Prime Minister in his recent speech on science gave two strong commitments for science funding during the downturn. First, that the science budget would remain 'ring fenced', which means that the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) cannot take money out of the science budget to cover shortfalls in spending elsewhere. Second, that the Government would maintain its commitment to sustained increased investment in science going forward. Both commitments are to be welcomed, but are they enough?

## Spending boost?

Prior to the Budget there was considerable media interest in the possibility that science and engineering might be a recipient of a spending boost. There has been considerable media interest in the possibility that science and engineering might be a recipient of a spending boost. One of the drivers for having targeted investment in research is to keep up with countries like the USA which are making science and engineering central to their recovery: \$21.5 billion of additional R&D funding was included in the US economic stimulus package. The other reason would be to support the Government's ambition to re-balance the economy in the wake of the financial collapse. Suggestions for increased funding have mainly focused on postgraduate education, the Technology Strategy Board and specific areas of research council funding.

The questions about the allocation of research funding to different areas has taken off again because of speeches by ministers suggesting that funding should be focused on national priorities. Lord Drayson, the

science minister, kicked this debate off by suggesting that the life sciences should be given greater support because the UK is a world leader in research in this area and that there are great growth opportunities in the sector. I do not think that anyone, especially *Biologist* readers, could argue against this. But in concluding his speech he said that increased funds in certain areas could come at the expense of others.

On Budget day there was additional funding for key technological areas through a new £750 million Strategic Investment Fund. There was no additional funding for the Research Councils, but they were told to re-allocate £106 million of funding to key areas of economic potential. The debate started by Lord Drayson on focusing the UK's research effort is now being implemented, without additional funding.

## Competitive advantage

One of the UK's competitive advantages in science is that it is internationally competitive across a range of disciplines. That breadth gives us an ability to attract a range of companies to do R&D in the UK and lets us respond to emerging challenges. Time often shows that decisions to disinvest in areas of research can be ill-judged. The growing recognition of the importance of food security has highlighted the perilous state of agricultural research in the UK. It is hard to build up areas of research once they have been allowed to run down.

The Campaign for Science and Engineering has been advocating directly to government and through the media about the importance of investing in science and engineering across the board. If the UK is going to rebalance the economy and tackle the major challenges facing the country it needs a broad and healthy research base now more than ever.

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