

Key priorities for the research base

Broadly, the criteria developed for the prioritisation of science and research funding in 2010 should remain as they are; supporting and encouraging excellence in research is key to securing the international competitiveness of the UK's research base.

Research Excellence

As we are in a continued environment of limited funding, difficult choices will need to be made about priorities in the next few years. The College therefore supports fully the further concentration of research funding on research institutions of proven excellence and with appropriate critical mass, breadth and multi-disciplinary capacity to address national challenges and compete internationally. Excellence in this respect should be measured consistently, through the RAE2008 and through REF2014 when the outcome is known. The UK's national capability and international competitiveness should be not just sustained, but enhanced.

Crucial to research excellence is the support, nurturing and development of a sufficient critical mass of new, high quality researchers in leading institutions. Funding should be directed at the highest quality areas in line with research concentration, recognising the strengths of institutions.

Research Funding

The sustainability of the research base is a key strategic priority. Short-term efficiency savings should not be sought to the extent that the long-term sustainability of the research base is undermined, and given the implications of the Wakeham savings in the last spending review, this is of substantial concern. The adoption of meeting the full economic cost of research through public funding has been the most enduring achievement in underpinning the UK's research success in the last decade, and should not be put in jeopardy. There should be clear evidence that long term savings will be achieved before any more research funding is distributed to publishers to cover gold open access payments at the expense of direct research funding to institutions.

The funding of recurrent research and capital for research infrastructure is inevitably a medium to long term investment. Substantial damage could be caused by short term fluctuations in funding. Capital funding in particular needs to be awarded primarily on a formulaic basis, with the criteria of research excellence and quality. The College fully supports the concern of the Russell Group, expressed in their evidence to the Triennial Review of the Research Councils, that research capital funding directed by Ministers, as opposed to formulaic approaches, risks producing less effective outcomes and breaching the Haldane Principle.

Although some research infrastructure can be financed in partnership with third parties, much of the infrastructure for core disciplines (e.g. physics) which underpin the international competitiveness of the UK's research base will need to be replenished, and public funding will inevitably be the predominant contributor.

Any suggestion that the MRC should move away from the family of Research Councils under the jurisdiction of BIS to, for example, the Department of Health would be damaging in the longer term and would put at risk the Haldane Principle.

Research Impact

The excellence, quality and reputation of an institution are the key factors that influence the confidence and funding inclinations of bodies outside the science and research base, including those in the innovation ecosystem. The experience of the College, with one of the widest range of international business collaborations of any UK university, is that research impact is only possible through outstanding underpinning research excellence. Difficult decisions will need to be made on research priorities after the outcome of the REF2014 exercise, and funding should only follow institutions that can demonstrate both outstanding research excellence and impact, rather than institutions where the research base is not of the highest quality.

The Government is already familiar with Jonathan Haskel's research on the contribution of high quality STEMB research to UK growth. Even in the current difficult funding climate, funding for science and research must be protected as an essential driver of UK growth.

Specific QR funding, reflecting levels of charity and business research income, remains essential to the continued leverage by universities of resources from these sources. It is a priority for sustaining the UK research base that these resources continue to make a substantial funding contribution.

Imperial College London
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