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# The future of science in the UK

Following the announcement of the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) on 20 October, the science community gave a collective sigh of relief. The £4.6 billion science budget is to be ring-fenced and maintained in cash terms, equating to a real-terms cut of approximately 9–10% over the next 4 years. However, efficiency savings of £324 million are expected from science over the CSR period – these savings will be ploughed back into research to offset the inflation-related losses. Alongside the ‘flat cash’ settlement for science, the £700 million spent on research by the Department of Health and the £700 million Medical Research Council budget have also been protected<sup>1</sup>. It is not yet fully known how the £2 billion the Ministry of Defence spend on research and development, the Technology Strategy Bar or research and development tax credits will be affected.

In responding to the announcement, Imran Khan, Director of the Campaign for Science and Engineering said, “A 10% cut over 4 years is significant, especially at a time when our competitors like the US and Germany are having real-terms increases, but today saw an important ‘Statement of intent’ from the coalition.”<sup>2</sup>

The settlement for science is a far cry from the large cuts rumoured in the run-up to the CSR announcement. At a post-CSR ‘Science Question Time’ event held at the Royal Institution on 26 October, the Rt Hon David Willetts MP remarked that it had been the quality of evidence made available by the scientific community that had been pivotal in securing the science spend. Efforts such as the ‘Science is Vital’ campaign which collected over 35000 signatures for a petition calling for science to be protected (the related ‘Science is Vital’ Early Day Motion 767 which, at the time of writing, had signatures from 132 MPs) and Royal Society’s ‘The Scientific Century – securing our future prosperity’ which outlined and modelled scenarios based on differing levels of science funding, have both played an important role in highlighting the importance of and support for science in long-term economic growth.

Despite the feeling of relief at the settlement, there is no room for complacency. In commenting on the results of the CSR in an article for *The Times*, Lord Rees of Ludlow (President, Royal Society) warns of increasingly severe global competition from those countries who have increased their investment in science such as the USA, China, India,

Germany and France. On the issue of capital spending, he remarks, “There remain areas of concern, especially with regard to capital spending, which been separated out for the purposes of the spending review. This should not be seen as separate to the science budget – the best scientists need the best facilities. This part of the budget is likely to face significant cuts, but it is to be hoped that, once the economy has recovered its health, the money taken out can be reinvested.”<sup>3</sup>

Lord Rees is right to highlight capital spending as an area of concern – major capital expenditure is expected to be cut by 50%. However, a few projects have been singled out for protection including the UK Centre for Medical Research and Innovation (UKCMRI) (£600 million with £220 million coming from the Department of Health) and the Diamond Light Source synchrotron (£69 million)<sup>4</sup>. BIS is set to receive £1.8 billion for its capital expenditure budget in 2011 which will decrease to £1.1 billion in 2012. Tough choices lie ahead for the Science and Technology Facilities Council in allocating the remaining funds, with the fate of other big facilities undecided.

Although the results of the CSR hail a period of funding stability, the wider political landscape holds much uncertainty. The shape of higher education looks set to change dramatically as we await the Government’s response to the Browne Review. The Government’s interim cap on non-EU migrants has come under fierce criticism, with many arguing that such measures will result in a ‘brain drain’. Public sector reform has seen the abolition, transfer and reconstitution of many science-related quangos.

The Royal Institution’s ‘Science Question Time’ challenged David Willetts on many of these issues. In addressing concerns about the effects of the immigration cap, David Willetts recognized the challenges that this issue presents and said that he is currently discussing this issue with the Home Office and hopes

## How is the £4.6 billion broken down?

- £2.75 billion for research councils
- £1.6 billion for university research
- £100 million for the national academies
- £150 million for the Higher Education Innovation Fund

to reach an agreement in the coming weeks. In addition, he said that the Prime Minister also understands the need for us to recruit the best minds. He then focused on the example of international students signing up to 'bogus institutions' and the abuse of the system this represented. It could be the case that effectively tackling issues such as these may uncover some additional flexibility in the system.

This event gave David Willetts and other panellists the chance to voice challenges they felt were going to be important in the coming months and years for science. David Willetts offered three:

- Flat cash vs. Inflation = a real reduction. Clearly, how this reduction will be managed presents a significant challenge and David Willetts made reference to the Sir William Wakeham review 'Financial Sustainability and Efficiency in Full Economic Costing of Research in UK Higher Education Institutions'.
- 2. Reduction in capital expenditure and in particular, the challenge posed by fixed international subscriptions and very costly equipment. He observed that, in this situation, in managing these expenditures, people can all too often become the variables. In expanding on this concern, he recognized the need for a stable career path in science and the development of "the right kind of career pyramid."
- The issue of QR and the 'clustering of excellence' and how best to address this. An example offered was that of institutions which score particularly highly in one subject area, but not as high in others. What is the best way of encouraging collaboration alongside competition? David Willetts then referenced the announcement of the Department of Health and Office of Life Sciences Therapeutic Capability Clusters programme.

The other panellists offered additional suggestions, further illustrating the breadth of challenges facing the sector. Philip Greenish (Chief Executive, Royal Academy of Engineering) posed the question how do we show that we're generating wealth? Professor Dame Janet Finch (Professor of Sociology, Manchester University and independent Co-Chair of the Council for Science and Technology) asked that, post-CSR, will concern now shift to the Research Excellence Framework? She expressed



Mark Downs (CEO, Society of Biology), David Willetts MP and Chris Kirk (CEO, Biochemical Society) during David Willetts' visit to Charles Darwin House on 13 October

concern that discussion on this issue would slip back into the old debates when the question really needs to be how to best use the resources we have. Professor Colin Blakemore (Professor of Neuroscience, University of Oxford and Former Chief Executive of the Medical Research Council) spoke of the need for quicker translation and asked how this can be done most effectively with public funds.

In the face of these challenges, the panellists offered words of congratulations and thanks to David Willetts for his work for science in the run up to the CSR. Janet Finch joked that at the current rate David Willetts may be heading for the prefix of 'much loved'. Colin Blakemore observed that David Willetts had been infected by the 'science bug', a condition which induces enthusiasm and support for science in those without a formal science background.

The release of departmental budgets, the Government response to the Browne Review, further discussion on the immigration cap and evolution of many science-related quangos over the coming months will paint a clearer picture of what the UK science sector will look like in the next 4 years and longer term. The efforts of the UK science sector in 2010 in ensuring that the message that science is vital for the UK's economic and social wellbeing was heard by decision-makers are to be applauded. In 2011, the Biochemical Society will be working hard to ensure that our members are both engaged with and aware of the science policy that affects them – we look forward to working with you.

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#### References

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