

Royal Society Statement on Science Budget Allocations

The Royal Society is pleased to submit this statement on Research Council budgets to the House of Commons Select Committee on Innovation Universities and Skills, in advance of its evidence sessions on the same topic. This submission has been approved by the President on behalf of the Royal Society.

The Society appreciates the Government's general support for science and for the overall settlement announced with the Budget in March 2007 and again in the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) outcomes. However, this year there are three specific cases of decisions about research council funding that have had unintentional negative impacts, which are worthy of further investigation. We further believe that a sensible response to this recurring problem is to have a committee to advise the Director General for the Research Councils (DGRC) on the Science Budget.

Medical Research Council's (MRC) translational fund clawback

It has been reported that £92 million is to be taken from the MRC's commercial fund. We believe that such a clawback would be a breach of faith with the scientists whose enterprise built up this fund in the past - a fund intended to support future discoveries that will improve and save lives. If institutions receiving public funds are not able to keep the extra resources they have earned, a damaging precedent is set. Government should be encouraging entrepreneurial behaviour in publicly funded institutions as well as the private sector.

Science and Technologies Facilities Council (STFC)

When the formation of the STFC was first proposed 18 or more months ago, the Royal Society identified a number of issues that had to be addressed for the new structure to succeed. One of these was the interplay between providing the capital costs of building a major facility and the recurrent costs involved in enabling researchers to use it to best advantage. The overall CSR allocation for STFC seemed not unfair, in the context of Government's overall priorities. However, the internal distributions within STFC do not properly provide for the recurrent costs, and will impact severely on grants to university physics departments - a matter of special concern in view of the government's recognition of the need to boost physics at all levels. We also believe the cuts would reduce the UK's scientific return from existing world-class facilities, and risk jeopardising our reputation as reliable long-term collaborators. We do not believe a review of physics is an adequate solution, and instead suggest that money is used from the capital budget to cover the shortfall.

Research Council budget raid in February 2007

In February 2007, it was announced that £68million would be taken from the Research Councils' budgets, in order to cover deficits elsewhere in the (then) Department for Trade & Industry's budget. £68m was a small percentage of the overall science budget, but such a cut sent a damaging signal to those whose commitment is needed for the UK to sustain its scientific competitiveness, and had a demoralising effect on the scientific community. We were also concerned that these cuts infringed the established principle that Science Budget funds are strictly ring-fenced within DTI, and set a dangerous precedent about the credibility of future assurances about ring-fencing.

Science Budget Advisory group

The Society believes that a new structure is needed to ensure that Ministers and their officials know the likely effects of RC allocations or any funding rearrangements. We believe the DGRC should be advised by an independent group of experts from all disciplines and from a range of institutions, who can identify any potential negative consequences of decisions and ensure they are drawn to the attention of all concerned. This was proposed in the 1993 White Paper 'Realising our Potential', although never implemented.