



The Save British Science Society

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SBS 04/10

Balancing different elements of the research landscape

SBS response to the Scottish Executive's consultation on the draft research strategy for SEERAD

1. Save British Science is pleased to submit this response to the Executive's consultation on the draft research strategy of the Environment and Rural Affairs Department. SBS is a voluntary organisation campaigning for the health of science and technology throughout UK society, and is supported by over 1,500 individual members, and some 70 institutional members, including universities, learned societies, venture capitalists, financiers, industrial companies and publishers.
2. SBS is delighted that the Scottish Executive is developing science strategies in this way. For too long, publicly-funded research on important agricultural and environmental issues has drifted, with no firm strategy for optimising public policy. Issues such as genetically-modified foods, tuberculosis in wildlife and livestock, fish stock in the North Sea, global climate change and mad cow disease have shocked and worried the public. Government procurement and handling of scientific advice has often served to heighten rather than allay public fear. We therefore applaud the current initiative.
3. SBS has a policy of not getting involved in discussions about how budgets are distributed among different subjects, so we cannot comment on the bulk of the proposed strategy. However, there is one issue on which we express strong support for the draft proposals, but we also draw attention to the need for it to be implemented in close coordination with other parts of the Executive.
4. In the mechanisms used in Britain for the funding of science, there is (at least nominally) a distinction between research carried out to inform policy and research carried out as part of the pursuit of knowledge either for its own sake or for other economic or social reasons. Individual government departments commission (or should commission) research aimed at developing policies that are

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in the public interest. Practically all their research should therefore be relevant to public policy.

5. We were surprised to learn that a few years ago, only 25% of SEERAD's research was classed as "policy relevant" and pleased that this figure has increased very substantially in the period covered by the previous strategy. We support the moves to increase this figure further, to 75%.

6. As a caveat, we would add that departmental research programmes need to include horizon-scanning activities, which may not be of obvious relevance to immediate policies, but which help ministers and civil servants prepare for future policy needs. Although this work may have no current policy relevance, it should be included in the overall figure of "policy relevant" work, because of its potential importance to future public policy.

7. Because of the distinction between the policy-driven research of individual departments and the research carried out for other ends paid for by other agencies, it would be foolish for the shift in focus towards "policy relevant" work by SEERAD to be carried out in isolation. The research system needs other kinds of research, notably blue-skies research, which is the seed corn from which future research ideas are developed.

8. In the Scottish system, this other element of the research landscape is funded partly through the Research Councils (which are UK-wide bodies the budgets of which are outside the control of the Scottish Executive) and partly through the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council. As bodies such as SEERAD quite rightly shift their focus towards research relevant to policy needs, the Scottish Executive as a whole must ensure that the research budget of SHEFC remains high. Otherwise, the policy of increasing the proportion of "policy relevant" research runs the risk of robbing Peter to pay Paul, and undermining the overall balance and coherence of the research landscape.

September 2004