



The Save British Science Society

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SBS 03/15

Investing in Scotland's scientific talent

SBS response to the Scottish Science Advisory Committee's
consultation on *Investing in scientific talent*

1. Save British Science is pleased to submit this response to the call for submissions to the consultation on scientific talent. SBS is a voluntary organisation campaigning for the health of science and technology throughout UK society, and is supported by 1,500 individual members, and some 70 institutional members, including universities, learned societies, venture capitalists, financiers, industrial companies and publishers.

2. SBS's commitment to science in Scotland is long-standing. In April, we published our *Agenda for the Next Four Years* in Scotland, and a booklet of responses from Party Leaders to questions about science policy in Scotland. In recent years, we have undertaken a campaign of publication and events in Scotland, which have informed our views of the state of science in Scotland. Two members of our Executive Committee are based in Scotland, as well as three members of our Advisory Council. Several Scottish universities are institutional members of SBS.

Overall approach

3. SBS strongly supports the overall approach of the paper, which sets out a vision of a well-funded science base, attracting world-class talent, and producing outstanding research which can then underpin a buoyant economy. We agree that this is achievable, although we believe it to be ambitious. We offer our wholehearted support for that ambition; if the Governments of the UK had consistently taken this approach, and *implemented* it, our science base, and consequently our economy, would be vastly stronger than it is.

4. SBS is particularly supportive of the paper's inclusion of all career stages, and of specialist technicians, in the strategy. Too often, science policies are built around individual initiatives for particular

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classes of individual, without proper consideration of the consequences for others. For example, the UK Government's increase in PhD stipends and postdoctoral salaries, announced last year¹, was not accompanied by reasonable increases in salaries for academic staff in universities, even though this had been recommended in its own cross-cutting review of science.² The Trade Secretary later claimed, in answer to a question "specifically on academics' pay" that we are "seeing a significant increase in many academic salaries, particularly with this new funding package", although the new funding related to postdoctoral researchers and postgraduates, not academic staff.³

PhD Students

5. SBS believes that if we want the best talent to work in the public science base, then we must pay for it. The SSAC's proposal, to write off some student debt, is one that has already been adopted for some students choosing to enter the teaching profession. The explicit thinking behind the proposal - that those undertaking PhDs should "not be disadvantaged, with respect to peers," seems to be fair and appropriate.

Young scientists

6. SBS has always supported the idea of prestigious fellowships for outstanding researchers, as a way of supporting the best, and allowing them a degree of freedom to pursue their ideas.

7. However, it would be a mistake to provide many more fellowships than the number of permanent jobs likely to be available at the end of them. Those who receive fellowships are likely to be the kinds of researchers who want to stay in the university system, and are also likely to be of the calibre that would merit a permanent job.

Mid career

8. SBS is especially pleased to see the SSAC considering the lot of scientists in mid-career. This is a career stage that has generally been ignored, and retention is just as important as recruitment in building a strong science base.

9. We therefore support the proposed "partial buyout of time" as a way of reintroducing the rapidly dying phenomenon of the "sabbatical". SBS supports the idea that such a "buyout" fellowship should come with a "generous research support grant," so that it can be used to do something really effective.

Professorial appointments

10. Again, SBS supports the idea of well-funded professorial posts. We note that the consultation document is somewhat circumspect about the funding for these posts. As with all the ideas in the document, it is important to recognise that adequate funding must be

made available. No part of the university system has spare cash, so funds cannot simply be redirected from other programmes.

11. We support the idea that the Chief Adviser on Science might become personally involved in attempting to secure funding from various sources, and that the posts be awarded against the highest international standards of scientific quality and achievement.

Specialist technical support

12. The SSAC is unquestionably correct in its analysis that universities are desperately short of specialist technical support in their research laboratories. It is absolutely right to promote funding for open-ended appointments of expert technicians, to relieve the insecurity of repeated short-term contracts on “soft money”.

Funding

13. This recommendation is key to the implementation of the other schemes proposed in the document. It is because of a shortage of money that universities have dismantled the system of sabbaticals and reduced the relative remuneration of researchers technicians. It is because of a large increase in the ratio of earmarked, directed funds to unencumbered funds that there has been a fall in support for mid career scientists and security for technical staff.

14. As the opening paragraphs of the consultation document make clear, Scotland has the raw materials on which to build a world-class science base and world class economy – smart people and a historical legacy of achievement. If that world-class science base is to create the kind of research results and economic progress that the SSAC envisages, then it will need appropriate levels of funding, not just for specific, targeted projects, but unencumbered funding for bright researchers to pursue innovative ideas that do not fit with a preconceived agenda about what is interesting or what might be useful.

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¹ *Investing in Innovation*, HM Treasury, DTI and DfES, 2003.

² *Cross-cutting review of science and research*, DTI and DfES, 2002.

³ *Minutes of Evidence Before the House of Commons Science & Technology Committee*, 26 March 2003.