



The Save British Science Society

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THE INDEPENDENT CAMPAIGN FOR EFFECTIVE SCIENCE POLICIES

SBS 04/04

18 March 2004

Sir David King and Sir Keith O'Nions
Office of Science & Technology
1 Victoria Street
London SW1H 0ET

Dear David and Keith,

Thank you for your letter of 5 March, following the very interesting breakfast meeting at Number 11 Downing Street, at which the Chancellor announced the ten-year investment framework for science. You asked if we could offer some thoughts, on not more than two pages, about the important areas on which the nation should focus for the next ten years, and also about promoting interdisciplinary research.

The Executive Committee of SBS discussed your request earlier this week, and came to the following conclusions.

First, we were unanimous in agreeing that it would be a mistake for the Government to try to predict which particular subjects should be the focus of investment over the coming decade. There are many well-known examples of failed attempts to predict what science will prove useful and important, and we feel very strongly that no such attempt should be made now.

Indeed, we think the Government should reverse the recent trend of increasing attempts to direct the course of research in the science base. The recent *Vision for Research* document published by RCUK sought to dictate a series of questions (some of them very specific) on which the research community must work in the coming years, while the *Allocation of the Science Budget* included ring-fenced programmes such as the Rural Economy that ought properly to be the job of other Government Departments, such as DEFRA.

I am sure we do not need to labour this point to experienced and distinguished scientists such as yourselves, but the ten-year framework must avoid the temptation to dictate too closely the relative distribution of funding among subject areas in science and engineering.

Among the policy areas that we believe require attention in the science base, two issues are extremely important. The first of these is the issue of recruiting and retaining the best people. There is continued evidence that the UK's universities have difficulties competing in the fiercely competitive global

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market for talented researchers, and there is no question that their inability to pay competitive salaries is a significant part of the problem.

The investment that is going into physical infrastructure in the science base is generating a great many new and exciting opportunities. To capitalise on them fully, it is essential that the nation sustains human resources of an equally excellent standard.

Although there have been some extremely welcome improvements in recruitment, including the increases in PhD stipends, the issue of retention has not had the same level of attention. Well before the end of the ten-year period covered by the framework, mid-career scientists, in their thirties and forties, need to see at least the same level of investment as younger researchers have seen in recent years.

The second, related, area is the balance between funds for which scientists can apply prospectively, on the basis of individual ideas, and those that are distributed on the basis of track record, for investment in untested ideas or projects that do not fit comfortably into the mainstream. The dual support system has become dangerously unbalanced, and whatever reforms are made to system, enhanced provision must be made for providing institutions with unencumbered funds for use at the discretion of the research community itself.

In the field of interdisciplinary research, we remain convinced that the single biggest hurdle at the moment is the Research Assessment Exercise. Although the Funding Council maintains that there is no evidence that interdisciplinary work has been hampered, their analyses cannot by definition include all of the interdisciplinary research that was never even started because researchers were concerned that it would be treated unfairly. Although we welcome some of the reforms to the RAE that are currently being considered, we have no doubt that the whole ethos of the exercise, which is to confuse control with accountability, and to force everyone to behave in similar ways, is continuing to harm the creativity of British research, including interdisciplinary work.

Thank you for the opportunity to feed into the ten-year framework in this way.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Peter', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Dr Peter Cotgreave
Director