



## The Save British Science Society

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### **Real support for talented researchers in a globally-competitive environment**

SBS response to the OST's consultation on the creation of an academic fellowship scheme

1. Save British Science is pleased to submit this response to the consultation on the creation of an academic fellowship scheme. 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. In general, SBS prefers to offer its own commentary on consultations rather than be constrained by leading and restricted questions in a *pro forma*. In the current consultation, paragraphs 27-39 contain a great number of specific and restrictive proposals, but the three questions that follow request (i) information about existing schemes, (ii) suggestions for placing extra burdens on universities, and (iii) comments on the assessment criteria. Respondents are apparently not given the chance to comment on such specific proposals as a requirement that fellows be required to do some teaching in their third year, or that fellows will not be eligible to apply for research grants for three years.

3. A consultation should be just that, so SBS has chosen to offer a commentary on some of the more serious parts of the proposals than would be possible within the constraints of the leading questions in the *pro forma* response form.

### **Questions 1-4**

4. The proposed system appears to be a very complex way of solving a problem which, in paragraph 5 of the consultation, is explained as being very simple.

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5. SBS believes that the research community had assumed that the scheme would cover the full costs of the fellowships, not a relatively small proportion (the axes of Figure 1 are not labelled, but it appears that only about approximately 10% of the costs will be met for the first two years of an appointment).

6. Moreover, Figure 1 uses the phrase “HEI Funding” as if universities have some untapped source of their own funds available to subsidise the costs of research that is nominally funded through academic fellowships, which were said to have been properly funded in the 2002 Spending Review. The only funding available to universities is the block grant from the funding councils, which is already inadequate to the tasks nominally attributed to it. SBS is getting rather tired of repeating the basic facts in responses to endless consultations – the amount of research money provided by the Higher Education Funding Councils, per £1 of Research Council funding, has fallen from £1.27 in 1986 to about 66p in the next financial year.<sup>1</sup> The existence of substantial amounts of “HEI Funding,” available to prop up new schemes, is a myth.

7. The suggestion that anyone “with the promise of” an academic post will be ineligible for the scheme is perverse, since the scheme specifically includes (at paragraphs 29-31) the requirement that awardees be given such a promise, on pain of “claw-back of funds or sanctions”. Universities may well *delay* offering such a promise until they know whether someone is to be included in the fellowship scheme, thus making the researcher’s career less certain, not more certain.

### **Questions 5-7**

8. The restrictions placed on fellows by paragraph 28 of the consultation seem unnecessary. SBS had thought that the academic fellowship scheme was to be a system for identifying talented individuals, and allowing them the freedom to pursue their ideas for the good of the UK’s research output, not a micro-managed programme in which some individuals who have been identified as worthy of a fellowship are banned from applying for research grants for two years, at a time when the fellowship is only paying 10% of their costs. The idea that people will be working “to the detriment” of research objectives is absurd. Anyone who has visited a university research department knows that researchers squeeze as much as they can out of every penny research funding, and are not in the habit of working against the interests of their funders.

### **Questions 8-10**

9. These do not apply to SBS.

**Final remarks**

10. SBS welcomes the recognition that extra resources are needed to support academic careers. The consultation correctly identifies poor pay, inadequate training and the lack of a clear career structure as serious problems for researchers.

11. However, we fail to see how the current proposals make much headway in dealing with these issues. This is a very complex scheme, micro-managed by many restrictions, which does not provide a complete package of serious salaries and research support for talented researchers. The questions in the consultation suggest that the OST does value the sector's opinion on the specific proposals, while question 6 asks us to come up with suggestions for extra burdens that could be placed on universities.

12. While reiterating that we welcome the recognition of the need for a scheme to solve the problems identified in the introduction to the consultations document, SBS concludes, regrettably, that the current proposals do not offer appropriate solutions.

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<sup>1</sup> *Forward Look 2001, Government-funded science, engineering and technology*, DTI, 2001 [Cm 5338].