

The Clerk
Science and Technology Committee
House of Commons
7 Millbank
London SW1P 3JA

Wed 27 April 2011

Re: The inquiry of the Science and Technology Committee into the implications of the Spending Review 2010.

Summary

There continue to be multiple uncertainties over the future funding landscape, especially in universities, leading to confusion and an inability to plan effectively. This is undermining the Government's position in statements around the value of science accompanying the comprehensive spending review settlement. It is essential that the impact of the spending review is re-visited in 2012.

Main text

The Society of Biology is a single unified voice for biology: advising Government and influencing policy; advancing education and professional development; supporting our members, and engaging and encouraging public interest in the life sciences. The Society represents a diverse membership of over 80,000 - including practising scientists, students and interested non-professionals - as individuals, or through the learned societies and other organisations listed below.

The Society welcomes the Committee's intention to review the complex evolution of the science funding environment since the Spending Review. Many forces are acting upon this sector at present including the Research Council settlements; the reduced departmental budgets available for direct commissioning of research, particularly by Defra; the abolition of the RDAs; the funding position and policies of the higher education Funding Councils, and the changes in student support arrangements arising from recommendations in the Browne Review, among others. Relatively few areas of science are immune from the impact of these multiple changes and it will be some time before the combined results are evident. For this reason we feel it appropriate to submit a short letter rather than to attempt extensive evidence-gathering at this time.

1. The Society has welcomed the support for science signalled in many Departmental statements, and encourages the underlying government position that science is a potential growth engine for the economy and an endeavour essential for national wellbeing. However, we reiterate our concern that the settlement presented science with significant and growing financial challenges.
2. We are concerned that pressure from reduced funding or reduced public and private sector investment may have negative impacts on national capacity in terms of skills and innovation. In addition we foresee significant dangers in the greatly reduced Research Council capital budgets and the increasing erosion of the value of the science settlement

due to inflation. Moreover, as other countries continue to invest in science, the UK risks losing international standing. All of this comes at a time when financial and other pressures are bringing about significant changes in the advice and scrutiny function provided by arms' length bodies, commissions and independent authorities etc. There is concern that the independent and long-range vision of many of these bodies cannot be easily recreated within the systems retained.

3. We wish to comment specifically on university science departments. Whilst some time has elapsed since the Spending Review and the Browne Review, we are concerned that terms such as 'chaos' and 'turmoil' continue to appear in descriptions of their funding landscape. Several reasons for this have been highlighted to us. Most Bioscience Departments can expect a reduction in their research grant and contract income from charities and government Departments and are aware that funding from Research Councils will become considerably more competitive, making it prudent to expect a reduction from this source also. University income from teaching is also highly uncertain at the moment. Submissions to the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) will shortly be complete for this year, but longer-term fee structures will continue to be influenced by the forthcoming White Paper and the process of OFFA reviews. In addition the trends in student enrolment remain unknown and may be a significant determinant of the medium-term financial stability of many institutions.
4. While continued reinvigoration and improvement of the environment for science learning and advanced skill development at university and higher level colleges is to be embraced, the sense of future instability in the skills pipeline currently being reported to us is a matter of great concern. This level of uncertainty may generate indecision or overreaction, neither of which would be a welcome outcome. Many areas of science learning are intrinsically expensive to deliver, without necessarily guaranteeing higher level earnings for their graduates. Choices on the fees applied to individual courses are likely to be influenced locally but may have implications for the overall viability of departments and the national coverage of learning centres for specific skills. In addition, the different funding and charging arrangements in Scotland, in particular, are likely to have an effect and there is valid concern about the appearance of funding gaps.
5. There will likely be pressure to increase the fees applied to taught MSc courses, many of which are funded through the T component of the HEFCE budget and extra support for which from Research Councils and industry is likely to be reduced. In these circumstances, UK graduates seeking to become Masters Students may well regard these fees as a significant barrier as they do not currently have easy access to student loans and fee support and indeed will not be covered by current OFFA agreements. MSc graduates are valued by many employers across science industries and regulatory agencies and, in addition, many universities now require a master's degree for PhD registration in line with the Bologna process. It is essential that arrangements do not present talented and ambitious UK students with a barrier to advancement at this level.
6. We would like to reiterate our position that there is a national need for high-quality bioscience graduates and bioscience research and that the challenge of maintaining quality degree programmes and research performance in a developing 'market' will require the careful attention, collaboration and strategic oversight of government's supportive agencies as well as academics. Moreover, small-scale laboratories may find it difficult to survive in an environment where high competition for grants and a change to focus on proven excellence will make it difficult to protect and nurture emerging excellence and creativity. We would encourage the Committee to re-evaluate developments in this area when there has been more time for the impact of the funding changes to bring about change, and certainly by late 2012 when there has been a full-fee student intake.

The Society of Biology is pleased for this response to be publicly available and will place a version on www.societyofbiology.org when the Committee allows. For any queries, please contact Dr Laura Bellingan, Senior Science Policy Adviser, Society of Biology, Charles Darwin House, 12 Roger Street, London WC1N 2JU.
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Member Organisations represented by the Society of Biology

Anatomical Society
Association for the Study of Animal Behaviour
Association of Applied Biologists
Biochemical Society
Breakspear Hospital
British Andrology Society
British Association for Lung Research
British Association for Psychopharmacology
British Bariatric Medical Society
British Biophysical Society
British Crop Production Council
British Ecological Society
British Lichen Society
British Microcirculation Society
British Mycological Society
British Neuroscience Association
British Pharmacological Society
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British Society for Ecological Medicine
British Society for Immunology
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British Society for Plant Pathology
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British Society for Research on Ageing
British Society for Soil Science
British Society of Animal Science
British Toxicology Society
Experimental Psychology Society
Fisheries Society of the British Isles
Genetics Society
Heads of University Biological Sciences
Heads of University Centres of Biomedical Science
Institute of Animal Technology
International Biometric Society
Laboratory Animal Science Association
Linnean Society

Marine Biological Association
Nutrition Society
RNID
Royal Entomological Society
Royal Microscopical Society
Royal Society of Chemistry
Science and Plants for Schools
Scottish Association for Marine Science
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Society for Endocrinology
Society for Experimental Biology
Society for General Microbiology
Society for Reproduction and Fertility
Society for the Study of Human Biology
SCI Horticulture Group
The Physiological Society
UK Environmental Mutagen Society
University Bioscience Managers' Association
Zoological Society of London

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