

Scientists anxious about the future of research funding

June 9 2015, by Athene Donald



Like in 2010, cuts to science are a real possibility. Credit: sw77/Flickr, CC BY-SA

With the Comprehensive Spending Review looming in the autumn, it is hard to know exactly how researchers will fare over the next five years. But given that there was no protection for the science budget in the Tories' manifesto, it seems everything is up for grabs. Last week's

announcement of [severe cuts of £450m](#) to the government department that funds research is a worrying sign. Another challenge is an ongoing review that has the potential to change the way that the funding is distributed.

The problem with 'place'

A series of recent policy announcements have left scientists wondering how the whole funding system for research might change. At the end of 2014, the former [coalition government](#) published a [strategy for science and innovation](#) that, while warm in sentiment, was short in detail and commitment. Much of the money committed in the document was not new, such as the government's decision to invest £200m in a [new materials centre](#) in Manchester, dubbed the "Royce".

The document, which introduced the term "place" as one of five central pillars, stressed the importance of regional clustering. This could be a problem because [research funding](#) in the UK has traditionally been distributed by the research councils on the basis of the most excellent applications, with ministers unlikely to get involved in the decisions. It is hard not to see this new criterion as a potential tool enabling ministers to launch projects as they see fit.

But perhaps the most important (because it is new) announcement in the strategy was the launch of a review into the research councils, to be led by Paul Nurse, president of the [Royal Society](#). This was despite the fact that the councils had just survived [another review](#) into their operations, led by the Cabinet Office.

In their [response to the review](#)'s consultation, the Royal Society – carefully keeping itself at arm's length from Nurse himself – commented that funding decisions should be more transparent and that those making them should be accountable. This is a clear reference to the unease felt

by many about decisions such as the allocation of such large funds for the Royce. The society also warned that if UK funding becomes distributed on an increasingly regional basis rather than following excellence, the risk of duplication and unhelpful competition might grow.

Inevitably one can start to see what might be termed battle lines being drawn up in the scientific community. An [article](#) putting "big science" (huge expensive projects such as the LHC) in opposition to small projects recently appeared, swiftly followed by a [rebuttal](#) stating that "size doesn't matter".

But, fundamentally we need to be sure that decision-making processes are as good as they can be and that scientists work closely with politicians to develop these ideas. This is important, as decisions should have the trust of the community as well as the approval of politicians. Research councils also mustn't be pitted against each other, because we need them all – but inevitably they are competing for funds. And we need to be sure that "place" doesn't trump excellence all the time and that our infrastructure is fit for purpose across the country, not just where a politician's whim chooses to fund something substantial.

The next generation

It isn't only the system of grants and infrastructure that seems to be mutating. There are very substantial changes in the way research students are resourced, with more changes potentially on the horizon. We have increasingly lost the ability to fund individual PhD students on project grants and block grants to departments alike. Instead, there is increasing concentration in big training centres of students in particular fields.

Critical mass may in some cases lead to a better training environment, but it also makes it decidedly patchy. Some topics don't find favour

while others end up with a very significant number of studentships available, extending over the next five years. Locking so many studentships up in this way, the next area screaming for a batch of studentships in the short term is likely to suffer.

We need to be sure UK science is not in a position where young researchers are only likely to be funded by the European Research Council because the UK system has moved so far that only established individuals and centres can get funded. (In passing one should note that such ERC funding would become essentially impossible if we headed for Brexit).

Finally, suddenly out of nowhere, there is a suggestion that [loans should be made available](#), not just for taught Master's programmes but for PhDs as well, for which there seems to have been no prior demand voiced at all. This introduces the danger of students expecting to be able to go to departments without regard to any developing strategy, nationally or locally, or whether the destination is fit for the student's purpose. That is hardly likely to be beneficial to the student or to the department concerned, which will struggle to plan ahead. This does not look like a joined-up policy and it is hard to see why it is being floated.

The UK definitely needs a good supply of the most talented students staying on to do research but that goal is not likely to be met by students taking up loans because they have the financial confidence that they'll be able to pay back the loan one day – regardless of the fact they already have debt around their neck from their undergraduate loan. This does not look like a progressive move – studentships in the sciences are currently needs-blind. Decisions are essentially based only on the quality of the student, which means that the best students get funded.

Let us hope the responses to the recent policy consultation come back with a resounding rejection of this potential scheme – and that that

rejection is heeded by the politicians.

With no higher education bill in the Queen's Speech we look set for more disconnected policy decisions affecting universities and research from different parts of the government. Scientists need to speak up, they need to engage with policymakers and they need to make the case collectively heard for the importance of [research](#) on all scales – with and without immediate impact. We are told Osborne "gets it" so let's hope the "it" he gets sits well with researchers.

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