Abrupt end for Australian foray into Singapore

An Australian university's bold experiment in exporting higher education to Singapore has ended much more quickly than anyone could have imagined.

On 28 June, the University of New South Wales Asia will be calling it quits after just one term. A university statement last week blamed low student numbers — fewer than half the expected 300 students had been enrolled.

The experiment aimed to provide research-based degrees, unlike some other 'imported' universities that offer just an English-language education. The University of New South Wales spent Aus$17.5 million (US$14.4 million) setting up the venture. It reportedly attempted to negotiate downsizing with the Singaporean government, but the proposal was rejected.

Singapore has been trying to attract international educational and research institutions to fuel its dream of becoming a cutting-edge research power. But last year, Johns Hopkins Medicine in Singapore announced the closure of its research facility among mutual allegations of broken promises (see *Nature* 442, 493–493; 2006).

Britain launches public debate on nuclear power

The UK government has stopped short of giving its full backing to new nuclear power stations in its latest proposals for the country's energy strategy. In a policy outline published on 23 May, it opened a public consultation on the issue — including several potential sites for new nuclear facilities, which the government is thought to view as essential for ensuring energy security while meeting its self-imposed target of cutting carbon emissions by 60% by 2050.

The document also sets out details of a mandatory carbon-trading scheme for large businesses such as banks and supermarkets. And it describes plans to build the world's most advanced carbon-storing fossil-fuel plant, to be opened by 2014, which will in theory capture 90% of its own greenhouse emissions.

L. PITARAKIS/AP

The UK government sees nuclear power as key.

But the news came as oil giant BP announced it was pulling out of plans to build a major carbon-capture plant in Peterhead, Scotland. The company said it did not want to delay the plant further by waiting for the bidding competition for funding to start as laid out in a timetable in the new white paper.

Fishers feel the long arm of the law

Crime-fighting, fingerprint-tracking tools have been turned on a new target in New York state: the small, weasel-like mammals known as fishers (*Martes pennanti*).

Researchers say they can use the tools to compare footprints from various fishers (pictured) as a non-invasive method of counting how many of the creatures live in a particular area. The technique could work better than monitoring skin or fur markings to track other rare species in the wild, and it is cheaper than DNA fingerprinting, the group says (C. J. Herzog *et al. J. Wildl. Mgmt* **71,** 955–963; 2007).

But the animals may yet confound the researchers. At six baited stations spaced throughout the Adirondack Mountains, most of the footprints came from the sooty paws of a single fisher.

WILDLIFE CONSERVATION SOC.

NIH calls halt to breeding chimps for research

The US National Institutes of Health has indefinitely extended a moratorium on breeding captive chimpanzees for research.

The moratorium has been in place since 1995, and affects only the 650 chimps owned by the agency's National Center for Research Resources. John Harding, director of primate resources for the centre, says that it simply costs too much to care for chimps — $300,000 to $500,000 over a single animal's lifespan.

Animal-rights groups welcomed the decision. But many researchers are disappointed. Some have argued that the glut of genomic data arising on chimps and other non-human primates will be useless without further studies on the biology of the animals. They will now have to hurry to find out what they can: in March, a group of external advisers said that the US population of research chimpanzees will die off within 30 years.

Radiation-ecology lab prepares to close its doors

A US lab that specializes in the ecology of radioactive waste looks set to close in the near future. "We are probably the last laboratory with expertise in radiation ecology at a time of nuclear renaissance," says Paul Bertsch, director of the Savannah River Ecology Laboratory near Aiken, South Carolina. The lab sits on the Department of Energy's Savannah River Site, which is home to a large stockpile of nuclear weapons and waste. For 56 years the department has funded research at the lab into how various toxic substances, including radioactive materials, interact with the environment.

But in recent years the agency has encouraged the lab to be less reliant on energy-department funds. And earlier this month the department announced that only 6 of about 20 proposed research activities were worthy of funding.

The House Committee on Science and Technology is investigating the cutback in funds, which committee staffer Dan Pearson calls "incomprehensible".

Gotham prize hedges bets for fight against cancer

US hedge-fund managers have teamed up with scientists to launch a competition for the next big idea in cancer research.

Applicants must first be accepted by an Internet-based club (www.gothamprize.org), whose membership will be vetted by a scientific advisory panel that includes cancer experts such as Bert Vogelstein of the Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions in Baltimore, Maryland. Members can then submit their idea — in fewer than 1,000 words — for a research project in basic cancer research, or in cancer diagnosis, prevention or treatment.

The person whose idea is judged to have the greatest potential will win US$1 million, even if they will not themselves be carrying out the research to test it. Another prize of $250,000 will be given in paediatric oncology. The ideas that emerge will be shared with other cancer-research funders.

The organizers say that current funding opportunities tend not to support untested ideas and that the annual Gotham prize will help fill this gap.