

Lukewarm reception for UK life-sciences investment

Government initiative to spur growth through medical research criticized for lacking ambition.

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Faced with sluggish economies at home and abroad, the UK government last week announced a series of spending measures and incentives it hopes will jump-start Britain's life-sciences industry and speed the commercialization of new treatments.

The announcements come a year after the government froze science funding and slashed capital spending, and follow massive layoffs in the pharmaceutical industry. But the measures do not undo the damage caused by the cuts, some analysts say. Moreover, the Strategy for UK Life Sciences, as the measures are called, contains little new spending.

"If it is a strategy to do more than set the clock back to how it was in 2009 or 2010, it needs to be more ambitious," says Michael Hopkins, who studies science and technology policy at the University of Sussex in Brighton. "All it has done is altered the angle of descent. In my book that is not progress. It is stalling."

The package includes:

- £180 million (US\$280 million) for a Biomedical Catalyst Fund to help academic researchers and companies commercialize research;
- £130 million to support treatments targetted at specific populations and drug-industry collaboration;
- £50 million for a Cell Therapy Technology and Innovation Centre in London;
- £75 million for construction of a planned bioinformatics hub near Cambridge.

The strategy also includes tax incentives and a plan to make patient data from Britain's National Health Service available to research.

Valley of death

Only half of the catalyst fund is new spending, according to a spokesperson for Department of Business, Innovation and Skills. The rest comes from the budgets of various agencies, including the Medical Research Council (MRC) and the Technology Strategy Board (TSB), a government body that supports commercialization of scientific research.

The goal of the fund is to help academics and businesses bridge the 'valley of death' between government funding for basic research and commercial investment. "We're at a bit of a watershed in terms of the life sciences in the United Kingdom. There is a clear lack of funding to take innovative ideas towards commercialization," says Chris Watkins, Head of Translational Research at the MRC.

The MRC will also fund consortia of university and industrial researchers to tackle chronic diseases such as diabetes and obesity. The consortia are still taking shape, Watkins says, but they will follow the model announced last year to prioritize research in inflammatory and immune diseases, such as rheumatoid arthritis.

The biomedical funder is devoting another £10 million to fund early-stage clinical research into 22 drugs developed by the pharmaceutical company AstraZeneca which did not make it to commercialization. The MRC will fund researchers to test these compounds in humans and animals to gain insights into basic biology, not necessarily to identify new drug targets.

Other measures in the strategy had been announced previously or been in the works for months.

The Cell Therapy Technology and Innovation Centre, due to open in London in 2012, is the second of three 'Catapult' centres supported by the TSB to commercialize research in areas in which it believes Britain has a competitive advantage. The other two centres will focus on high-value manufacturing and off-shore wind power.



Random acts

The European Bioinformatics Institute in Hinxton, which received £75 million from a government fund for capital improvements, has long expected government support for the construction of a facility to house a Europe-wide bioinformatics hub called ELIXIR, an EBI spokesperson says.

"It's a narrative that knits together lots of fairly random acts of policy and various isolated initiatives that have taken place over the last six months," says physicist Richard Jones, Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research and Innovation at the University of Sheffield.

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The plan is tacit recognition that cuts to science spending were a mistake, Jones says. "It's welcome that they've got more capital money going into science and innovation. That's on the back of a very large cut they themselves did a year ago."

Imran Khan, director of the Campaign for Science and Engineering, a London-based lobby group, says the life-sciences strategy should spur some economic growth, but more investment is needed. "We don't think it's quite getting there in terms of turning the UK research and development sector into the game-changer it can be," he says.

Hopkins says the Life Sciences Strategy is not only too small, but also too focused on a pharmaceutical industry eager to outsource costly research and development to academic scientists. Small companies, Hopkins adds, are a better investment to spur growth because they are less likely to relocate to the United States or Asia. "If you want to keep the UK industry in the UK, you need to engage in more than Big Pharma. We can't just put all our eggs into the big-company basket," he says.

But even a Life Sciences Strategy aimed at start-ups would not resuscitate Britain's medical industry, Hopkins says. The £180 million in the catalyst fund, for instance, is small change compared to the money private investors can deliver. "Fundamentally there needs to be something more creative done to get the City of London, or Wall Street, or whoever, to come back to the idea of investing in life sciences, and that's what the government has not done."

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