

naturejobs

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If a plan by the UK government to reshuffle research funds goes ahead, it could trigger an exodus of both pounds and professors from some of the country's most established universities in favour of a host of up-and-comers. Only two of the country's more prominent universities — the University of Oxford and University College London — stand to gain (see *Nature* **441**, 917; 2006) under the new plan. Other high-profile universities, such as the University of Manchester, Imperial College London and the University of Cambridge, would all lose significant funds and, therefore, research infrastructure and jobs.

The revamped method for distributing funds, which is tentatively scheduled to be phased in after 2008, is based on how much income universities already attract from competitive grants, charities and industrial contracts. Although the new benchmarks may still be used to compare funding distribution against the current Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), many researchers are concerned that the proposed system will cause major problems. Critics say that the system would bias funding towards applied over basic research and that it ignores important factors, such as the number of PhD students trained by an establishment, its publication record and the number of patents it has been granted.

The plan, which could greatly benefit some of Britain's less-heralded institutions, such as Cranfield University and the University of Greenwich, reminds me of what would happen if pleas by US members of Congress to reallocate money to underdog states such as Mississippi and Alabama were to be heeded. Yes, there would be a more even distribution of money, but it would be on a questionable basis and would give uncertain results. Maybe Britain needs to go back to the drawing board to find a way to give funds to researchers, rather than their institutions, based on the merit of the proposals and the individual scientists' track records. If not, some of the country's best researchers may not switch from Cambridge to Cranfield, as some who back the new plan might hope, but from Manchester to Massachusetts.

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