Unbalanced portfolio

British research councils should still foster basic science.

Researchers may believe in science for science's sake, but governments often have different ideas. They consider it their duty to seek return from the tax monies they spend — a point of view that is reasonable and responsible for someone in charge of public funds.

The trick, of course, is to avoid taking too narrow a view of what constitutes a return. In their efforts to be business-like, government funding officers will often try to measure success with corporate-style metrics and milestones. This may work well for some areas of government endeavour, but basic research is not one of them. Almost by definition, the frontier of human knowledge is a realm that has no milestones and that encompasses many dead-ends and failures for every advance. Viewed purely by the numbers, researchers' efforts can seem grossly inefficient.

Some recent developments in the United Kingdom point to the dangers that can arise from this cultural divide. A Special Report on page 1150 describes how government officials, understandably eager for a return on their investment in science, are encouraging research councils to build partnerships with industry, and are redirecting funds towards societal problems such as ageing and climate change.

Such initiatives are a necessary part of any nation's science policy. Indeed, many of the research councils' chief executives, who are perhaps eager to win more money for their programmes, have willingly gone along with them. The challenge is to strike an appropriate balance. In practice, continued pressures have led some councils to cut their basic-science portfolios. They have trimmed investigator-led grants, and slashed funding for fundamental fields such as astronomy and high-energy physics in favour of innovation campuses and government initiatives.

Where adequate funding has not been supplied, the emergent effect of the pressures from government is tantamount to an attack by abandoning basic science. If unchecked, this neglect will lead to the loss of scientific subdisciplines and a decline in such intangible benefits as inspiring the young and national pride. And the pressures on research councils may get tougher, as historical declines in science spending within government departments also need to be reversed.

> **"The trick is to avoid taking too narrow a view of what constitutes a return."**

The person responsible for developing advocacy for research council budgets is the director general of science and research, currently absent within government. When Adrian Smith, a statistician currently principal of Queen Mary, University of London, takes up the job in September, he should make it a top priority to ensure that the government fully appreciates the added value of basic science and the costs of its neglect. ∎

Comédie-Française

Regional and minority languages should be protected, in France, and elsewhere.

Quelle horreur ! The 40 élite members of the *Académie française* are jumping out of their *fauteuils*, incensed that legislation passed by France's National Assembly would put regional languages such as Breton, Occitan, Corse, Alsatian, Catalan and Basque into the constitution as part of the national heritage. The members are particularly outraged that the regional languages would get a mention in the first article of the constitution — which defines France as an "indivisible, lay, democratic and social republic" — ahead of the second article, which designates French as the official language. The academy, created in 1635 to guard the purity of the French language, voted unanimously this month to condemn the move as "defying logic", and being a threat to the nation.

Actually, "defying logic", is an apt description of the vote itself. Globalization is already threatening to extinguish half the world's 6,000–7,000 languages. That would be a tragic loss to humanity and our understanding of it, if only because knowledge and culture are inescapably interwined with the languages within which they evolved. Languages also enrich each other, and provide a trove of data for research in linguistics and history. The other main French academy, the *Académie des Sciences*, should make itself heard on the matter.

Multilingualism has other practical benefits. French scientists who speak regional languages in addition to the national tongue testify that early bilingualism has helped them go on to master English and other languages. Some even argue that the thought processes involved have helped them to be better and more creative scientists.

The *Académie française* argues that France's regional languages are so obviously part of its heritage that there is no need for constitutional safeguards. That is disingenuous. It is precisely the lack of constitutional recognition that has blocked France from ratifying key international treaties to conserve minority languages: the courts have ruled that ratification is forbidden by existing constitutional principles, such as the indivisibility of the Republic and the unity of the French people.

Indeed, if earlier French governments had had their way, Breton, which is spoken in Brittany, would have been eradicated long ago. Only stubborn Breton persistence has prevented this from happening, notably through the creation of the Diwan Breton-language schools from the 1970s onwards.

Yec'hed mat (to your health) to that — because regional and minority languages, like endangered species, merit protection. Languages that aren't revitalized through constant exercise die out. It's hypocritical that France, which is one of the first to staunchly defend its own elegant national language, should deny that same right to regions that wish to keep their own languages alive and vibrant. The National Assembly's legislation was rejected last week by France's conservative Senate. But it could yet be reintroduced, and should be: for the sake of both science and its own rich heritage, France should remove the constitutional obstacles as quickly as possible, and ratify the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. ∎