

THIS WEEK

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Scotland be brave

Those who want to build a better future for Scotland should resist cuts to an innovative scheme that helps its universities to compete with larger rivals elsewhere.

Not everyone in academia can have the resources of a Harvard or an Imperial College. Most university departments are modest, with constrained access to equipment and specialist expertise. A major part of academic life is the constant battle to forge the partnerships needed to deliver research and teaching of international quality.

A novel and illuminating response to this challenge began to take shape in Scotland seven years ago, with the creation of SUPA — the Scottish Universities Physics Alliance — which sought to build much closer links between the research and postgraduate teaching of physics departments at six universities. The ‘pooling’ idea has now been taken up by nine other disciplines — and has been widely acclaimed at home and abroad (see *Nature* 447, 1031; 2007). Yet last month, the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), which also provides block funding to Scotland’s universities, announced that its support for the pools will be cut next year by 15%.

The impact of the cuts on the pools will be especially severe because the savings will have to be found in the small portion of their budget that is not allocated to permanent staff costs — money that supports, for example, the movement of students between universities. They also illustrate a problem that is likely to resonate around the world: as government funding cuts bite, agencies, under pressure from scientists and institutions, will be tempted to pull back from funding the most innovative and arguably relevant work, and concentrate on what they view as core activities. At grant agencies such as the US National Institutes of Health, this might mean cutting interdisciplinary programmes to protect single-investigator grants. In the case of the SFC, it means maintaining the block grants that support university research, but cutting funding for the pools.

A wise agency would do the opposite. Support for Scotland’s research pools should continue, even if that means finding the money by trimming the basic block grant. Cutting that whole cake would be difficult politically, because it would mean the Scottish government could not claim that it has “fully protected research funding”. But it is worse to proclaim that the cake has been protected when the cream has been siphoned off. Funding the pools doesn’t directly support the best research — that is backed, on the basis of the Research Assessment Exercise, by the block grants — but they are the best strategic approach for strengthening the research base.

The pools have already enhanced Scotland’s strong performance in UK-wide competition for research-council grants (11% of the money for 8% of the population) and will surely help to bolster its exceptional performance in international comparisons (most citations in the world per unit of gross domestic product, and second only to Switzerland in citations per paper, according to the *International Comparative Performance of Scotland’s Research Base November 2009* — a report published for the Scottish government).

The pools were hard work to set up. They had to overcome

customary and powerful rivalries between neighbouring university departments. But with the support of the universities and of the SFC, the longer-established ones have developed strength and resilience. Just two weeks ago, Scottish education minister Michael Russell — who was regaled with praise for SUPA on a recent visit to CERN, the particle-physics laboratory in Switzerland — warmly complimented the pools in the Scottish Parliament, calling for them to be “taken to the next level”.

“Scotland’s excellent university research is one of the nation’s main assets.”

According to the plan subsequently released by the SFC, that ‘next level’ will be down. Pool leaders are fuming over the incoherence of the cuts, and university heads have called on the SFC to reallocate the relatively small amount of money involved — £3 million (US\$4.8 million) — from an ‘invest-to-save’ component of its budget.

Some of the pools, meanwhile, will try to take their case directly to the people, who will elect a new Scottish government on 5 May. This raised profile will be welcome, as Scotland’s excellent university research is one of the nation’s main assets — but one rarely noticed amid the noisy debate over student fees.

Those running for the election should be asked if they would restore full funding to the research pools. They can’t hide behind the SFC, the quasi-autonomous organization that makes the call, because it takes its marching orders on strategic questions from the government. Political leaders should back the research pools, which have shown themselves as a promising way to let a small country carry weight in a ferociously competitive research world. ■

Soya scrutiny

A partnership to encourage sustainable farming in Brazil may not be as green as it seems.

Large swathes of the Brazilian Amazon have come to resemble the midwestern United States in recent years, having been planted with soya as far as the eye can see. This development has unnerved conservation organizations, which fear that huge expanses of pristine rainforest are being felled to make way for the lucrative crop. A widespread hope is that large agribusiness, aware of both the need to protect this fragile environment and the importance of good public relations, can be induced to farm more sustainably. But a recent assessment of one major partnership between conservationists and the soya industry suggests the need for caution.