

Correspondence

UK research reform: protest now

The grass-roots campaign group Science is Vital (<http://scienceisvital.org.uk>) shares the Royal Society president's concerns over aspects of the government's Higher Education and Research Bill (see V. Ramakrishnan *Nature* **538**, 459; 2016).

The bill does not yet offer sufficient protection for the operational autonomy of the UK research councils. Neither does it provide legal guarantees that future reforms will take into account the views of Parliament or the research community.

We are also alarmed by mechanisms the bill could use to aid entry and exit of institutions from the higher-education 'market'. For example, the new Office for Students will have the power to revoke university status without parliamentary assent. Such powers undermine support for the autonomy of seats of learning and enquiry that have proved their cultural worth for generations.

In our view, verbal assurances from the Minister for Universities and Science are insufficient. The stated "primacy of scientific and academic decision-making" must be enshrined in the bill.

As the bill is readied for its third reading before being debated in the House of Lords, we call on the UK research community to contact their MPs urgently to relay concerns about the dangers in this proposed legislation (see go.nature.com/2fsmclc).

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UK research reform: poor timing

Science and universities in the United Kingdom surely do not need a major and controversial

restructuring during the approach to Brexit (see *Nature* **538**, 5; 2016). The government's proposed Higher Education and Research Bill stands to erode university autonomy, downgrade individual research councils and concentrate executive authority over science into a single 'supremo'.

It is plainly desirable for the research councils to collaborate more smoothly. And ministers need better advice on apportioning funding between councils and on such matters as balancing small-scale, 'responsive mode' grants against large strategic initiatives. However, these inadequacies can be remedied without the wholesale reorganization envisaged in the bill. From my perspective as Astronomer Royal and former Royal Society president, the research councils work better than most government agencies and need only fine-tuning.

A good start would be to ensure that there is a senior independent voice in Whitehall by reviving the post of Director-General of Research Councils, supported by a strong advisory board.

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UK research reform: get the facts straight

For universities with a royal charter, the UK government's proposed Higher Education and Research Bill does not "rip up an 800-year-old settlement" (*Nature* **538**, 5; 2016). And on a factual point, the University of Cambridge does not have a royal charter. Pope John XXII gave us formal recognition in 1318, and our privileges were confirmed by Parliament in 1571 through the Oxford and Cambridge Act.

A royal charter recognizes an institution or group of

individuals as a single legal entity, each with different responsibilities and rights. It is an exaggeration and simplification of the bill's proposals to say that it will revoke these. Instead, the bill would legally recognize institutional autonomy, the principle of dual support and the sector's diversity.

Evidence-based debate will improve the proposed legislation, for example through the Green Paper consultation and the Public Bill Committee (see go.nature.com/2ejk7km). Discussions will continue as part of standard parliamentary procedure. The bill does not need to be thrown out to protect academic freedom.

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Genetics boosts US–Cuban links

As economic doors open between the United States and Cuba, human genetics offers one promising area for scientific collaboration (see *Nature* **537**, 600–603; 2016). Reversing 50 years of restriction remains a formidable task — particularly with scant financial and human resources.

Community genetics is incorporated into Cuba's health-care system. As in the United States, prenatal genetic testing, screening of newborns and clinical genetics services are all available. Comparative studies on US and Cuban populations could help to clarify the genetic contribution to disease — for example, by revealing rare inherited genomic variants.

Miami is one of the best-positioned US cities to lead such scientific partnerships, given its social and cultural ties with Cuba (Florida is home to 66% of the US Cuban population). At the University of Miami's Leonard M. Miller School of Medicine, we are working to develop exchange programmes with medical

institutions in Cuba. These mutual learning opportunities should foster multidisciplinary research partnerships in the next generation of medical geneticists.

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Precision oncology is not an illusion

In our view, it is unreasonable to condemn personalized medicine for oncology on the basis of the limited success of a few trials (see V. Prasad *Nature* **537**, S63; 2016). We suspect that those failures were more likely to be caused by shortcomings in methodology.

With more than 40 precision-oncology drugs on the market, such therapies are helping tens of thousands of US patients by targeting specific molecular abnormalities. For example, mutations in the gene that encodes the epidermal growth-factor receptor are likely to occur in 10% of the 186,240 or so new cases of non-small-cell lung cancer predicted for 2016 (see go.nature.com/2fpxits). And the 8,220 people with chronic myeloid leukaemia (CML) predicted for this year will almost all carry the 'Philadelphia' chromosomal translocation (see go.nature.com/2fbbarj).

There are precision-oncology drugs to counteract both defects. Indeed, the life expectancy of people with CML is now starting to approach that of the general population (S. Saussele *et al.* *Blood* **126**, 42–49; 2015).

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