

## *View from the Top*

# Universities have a strong case for more investment

Only the strengths of UK research will persuade government to spend more, says **Jonathan Adams**

I AM OFTEN SURPRISED at the tendency of British researchers, when considering the four corners of any SWOT analysis of UK research, to concentrate not on the strengths of the research base and the opportunities that could therefore be tackled but to emphasise weaknesses and threats. From an investment perspective this doesn't make sense. Furthermore, the positive arguments for increased research funding cannot be taken as a given but must be repeatedly asserted alongside evidence of current shortfalls in funding

Work carried out by *Evidence Ltd* over the last year for both OST and the HEFCs has shown that UK research has in fact improved against international benchmarks over the last 15 years. Our report to the HEFCs on 'Maintaining Excellence', shortly to be published by HEFCE, also makes clear the extent to which that achievement is dependent on the efforts of academic staff and their success in wringing every drop from a thinly stretched resource base. The crux of the report, however, is the strong evidence it offers that UK research deserves sustained investment for the returns it provides rather than simply because it is under threat.

Since the mid 1980s the UK higher education research base has improved in efficiency, achieving more with the available resources, and has at the same time increased its effectiveness by driving its comparative research impact upwards against growing international competition. Research impact (typically, citations per publication standardised for year and discipline) is by no means an ultimate measure of research quality but it does correlate well with other aspects of research performance and has the advantage of providing a basis for international comparisons. Our report also shows that there is a dynamic relationship between grade and performance in most UoAs, with progressive improvements in many aspects of research activity as units achieve higher grades and gain additional resources.

What all this adds up to is strong and quantitative support for the argument that the Treasury gets a handsome return on the funds it provides for investment in University research and in the science and engineering base generally. This is important, because it is easy for people working in the research system, conscious of how hard they and their colleagues are working and how thin their resource base has become, to take the arguments about the importance and quality of research as a given and to focus only on the problems that need to be remedied. A series of important studies – by us and our colleagues at PREST and at JM Consulting and elsewhere – have indeed revealed the shortage of critical equipment, the absence of key facilities, the excessive hours that staff have come to accept as normal, and the deteriorating state of the infrastructure. Nonetheless, arguments about such downside factors may not be persuasive to sceptical investors looking for added value among the many alternative political and social sinks.

There is no reason now why it should not be argued that there is tangible evidence that the research base is an excellent investment. At the same time, this must be used to persuade politicians and the Treasury that the returns can only be maintained by addressing the revealed threats to maintaining research excellence and volume. These threats are not abstract, to some system about which most people know little, but to a key functional part of the UK's innovative and technological capacity.

Reaction to a recent editorial (*Science* 296, p. 805 - 3 May 2002) has surprised us by its negativity. Correspondents seem unwilling to relish their success, as if the fact that they are doing so well is offensive to the perceptions of an oppressed minority! In fact, there is every reason for Universities and UK researchers generally to argue from strength that there is no better place to invest in growth and development for wider social and economic gains.

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*Jonathan Adams is managing director of Evidence Ltd. The Maintaining Excellence report will be available from <http://www.evidence.co.uk>*