

Consultation response

- House of Commons Science and Technology Committee
- The Impact of Spending Cuts on Science and Scientific Research

1. The Royal Geographical Society (with The Institute of British Geographers) is the learned society and professional body for geography. Formed in 1830, our Royal Charter is for 'the advancement of geographical science'. We have more than 15,000 members and Fellows, of whom a substantial number are academics and other researchers whose work we support through a range of activities. These include holding the largest geographical research conference in Europe, publishing three international peer-reviewed journals, one of which (Transactions of the IBG) is the top ranked geographical journal in the world, co-ordinating specialist research groups and providing funding opportunities for researchers at all careers stages. We work closely with all HE geography departments.

2. As a discipline, geography is uniquely placed within the debate on science and scientific research, as a subject that combines physical science with social science and humanities. Since many of the scientific environmental issues facing the world have their causes and solutions in societal and individual behaviours, geography occupies a key research niche. It spans both SET¹ and non-SET funded areas in scope. The discipline is at the forefront of the tensions between SET and non-SET funding streams and suffers from the inadequate manner in which such 'interdisciplinary' subjects are funded.

3. The Society strongly recommends that before cutting/restricting science, engineering and technology (SET) designation/funding, the current arbitrary decisions on what is/is not SET classified need to be reconsidered. When it suits government geography is classed as a science; and vice-versa. For example, recent policy and skills and training documents include geography within SET and there are clear and convincing arguments as to the science research base in geography (see point 7). However, currently it is funded for QR (by HEFCE) entirely as a non-SET subject, which is placing unacceptable strains on properly resourcing the science-base of the discipline. It should be recognised for what it is, a part-STEM subject, and funded accordingly and with STEM protection for its 50% science component.

4. HEFCE is aware that there are inconsistencies of funding scientific research at the STEM: non-STEM boundary. The same piece of science conducted from a Geography department attracts substantially less QR resource than had it been conducted from an Environmental Science department or another STEM designated subject. Thus the true costs of conducting quality science are not being covered under the non-STEM funding for geography. Unless the current consideration and the consultations being undertaken HEFCE can address the STEM lottery, further reductions in UK Science and Innovation, in an area that is increasingly being profiled by NERC and others as important to the nation – the environmental sciences - seem inevitable. Geography and geographers make a substantial contribution to research in the environmental sciences.

5. As the learned society representing and promoting the discipline we have sought evidence and considered opinions about the position of geography from across the academic community, including all departments of geography in the UK, our Fellows and members, and the Society's research groups. Much of this evidence has also contributed to our response to the recent HEFCE consultation on the Research Excellence Framework (REF).

¹ We use STEM and SET interchangeably

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pressing ones facing society and government. Published evidence demonstrates that there is a 50:50 balance between research which is physical geography and human geography (including social science environmental studies), and it would be appropriate to provide 50% STEM protection to Geography.

10. Thus, in conclusion:

- a. Before even considering cuts in STEM funding, it is critical that there is a level playing field and those subjects that rightfully deserve part STEM funding are recognized and funded as such.
- b. In our view all STEM areas, including physical geography, are important, as are both blue-skies research and more directly applied research. We see no robust, future-proof and readily identifiable basis on which one area of STEM research should or could be chosen above another for cutting. All should be treated equally and, if cuts are to be made, these should be the same across the board.
- c. The needs of science must be balanced with the needs of social science too. While funding needs for social science research are less, so too is the current budget allocation to social science research. Research issues relating to crime, social cohesion, employment, sustainable lifestyles, security, economic development, and many more, demand quality social science research. Robbing Peter to pay Paul will not foster a strong and vibrant UK research base as a whole.