COMMENT

Taking stock on research

DEFRA is currently revising its strategy for investment in science, with a view to producing a new Evidence Investment Strategy by the autumn of this year. Its aim is to build on its previous Evidence and Innovation Strategy (for 2005 to 2008), to enable it ‘to invest in evidence in the most cost-effective way (taking full account of existing knowledge and the evidence funded by others)’ and to ensure that it has ‘robust and timely evidence to support the development, appraisal, delivery and evaluation of policy’.

It makes sense to base policies on sound scientific evidence and to cooperate with others in ensuring that the resources available are used to best effect. However, at a time when funds in Defra are uncommonly tight, and the department is intent on sharing more of the costs of animal health with a reluctant industry, the implications for animal disease research are potentially worrying.

As part of its evaluation process, Defra has recently published an independently conducted ‘External Evidence Capability Review’, to see what scientific resources are available to meet its strategic requirements now and in the future, whether in research and other forms of ‘land-based’ research in the UK, taking stock of the facilities available for carrying out agricultural and other forms of ‘land-based’ research in the UK, has undertaken a similarly independent assessment of the facilities available for carrying out agricultural and other forms of ‘land-based’ research in the UK, taking stock of the facilities available for research on animal diseases as well as in other areas. The report of this study, which has also just been published,2 draws attention to the importance of such facilities in underpinning research to help meet key challenges, such as helping to ensure future food supplies or tackling endemic and emerging animal diseases. At the same time, it highlights the fragility of the existing infrastructure, where capability is dependent not just on the facilities themselves, but also on the skills and expertise of their staff. It also highlights the dangers of research facilities being reliant on a single source of funding, because the priorities of funding bodies (including Defra) can change.

Such arguments are clearly relevant in the case of the Institute for Animal Health’s (IAH) laboratory at Pirbright, where vital facilities are in need of updating but redevelopment is still under debate (see VR, February 21, 2009, vol 164, p 221; March 7, 2009, vol 164, p 310), but they also apply elsewhere. As Professor Douglas Kell, the BBSRC’s chief executive, commented when the report was published last week, ‘This report demonstrates the very great importance of a relatively small number of strategic resources that the UK needs to deliver land-based research. The very nature of land-based research facilities means that they cannot be set up or shut down at short notice.’

In a shortlist of facilities drawn up on the basis of the study, IAH Compton, IAH Pirbright, the Moredun Research Institute and the Veterinary Laboratories Agency are all identified as being strategically important in terms of animal disease research, with others being identified as important for other areas of animal science. The report notes that facilities associated with animal science show a high level of flexibility between species, as well as high levels of responsiveness, especially in relation to animal diseases. Such flexibility remains vital for responding to diseases like bluetongue, influenza and foot-and-mouth disease. The study also identified some areas of overlap in terms of the facilities provided, but this was mainly between university-owned farms and low-security animal containment units used by research institutes. It was less apparent in high-security containment facilities which have a unique knowledge associated with them. As the report points out, a degree of overlap is no bad thing, as it can help in dealing with emergencies. However, duplication becomes harder to maintain when funds are scarce and competition for resources intensifies.

This must be the concern as Defra again reviews its research priorities. The resources available for animal disease research are already spread thinly, and the facilities needed are often expensive to maintain. Expertise in relevant fields can take years to develop, but can be very quickly dissipated. Once lost, it can be hard to regain.

1 Survey of External Capabilities to meet Defra’s Strategic Requirements, Arthur D. Little Ltd. Available at www.defra.gov.uk/science/how/strategy.htm
2 BBSRC/HEFCE Study of Land-Based Facilities and Resources. Arthur D. Little Ltd. Available at www.bbsrc.ac.uk/organisation/policies/reviews/operational/0905_landbased_facilities_report.html

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