House of Lords debate on research funding in universities

House of Lords debate on the Science and Technology Committee’s report: ‘Science research funding in universities’

Wednesday 9th September 2020

Key points

- The Association of Medical Research Charities (AMRC) is a membership organisation of over 150 leading medical and health charities funding research in the UK
- AMRC charities invested £1.9 billion in research in 2019. Of that research, 87% of takes place in universities.
- Covid-19 has hit charity-funded research hard. Charities estimate an average decrease of 40% in overall UK university research spend for the remainder of the academic year (May-Aug 2020).
- AMRC charities collectively funded 17,000 researchers’ salaries across universities, the NHS and other bodies in 2019. The reduction in charity-funded research will have a significant impact on university skills and capacity. We are risking a ‘lost generation’ of researchers and expertise.
- Medical research charities are calling for a Life Sciences-Charity Partnership Fund to preserve the distinct and valuable charity component of the UK’s research base. This Government match-funding would help plug the shortfall of at least £310 million in sector spending projected for FY20/21.
- The Government’s university research support package is not a long-term solution to fall in charity funded research as a result of COVID-19. It remains unclear how the research support package directed towards universities could protect the future pipeline of charity-funded research.
1. Charity-funded research in universities

- Medical research charities are a key component of the UK’s world-leading and uniquely diverse research base and life sciences sector.
- In 2019, members of the AMRC collectively invested £1.9 billion in UK R&D, more than the Medical Research Council (MRC) and the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) combined, and accounting for half of publicly funded medical research nationally.
- University research is the mainstay of medical research charity strategies. In 2018, 87% of AMRC member investment in research took place directly in universities.
- In 2017-18, 15% of university research income was sourced through UK charities. UK businesses provided 4.4% of research income.

2. Impact of COVID-19 on charity-funded research in universities

- As a result of the impact of Covid-19 on charity income, AMRC’s members are planning for an average 41% decrease in research spend in FY20/21, resulting in a projected reduction in UK medical research investment of at least £310 million.
- Charities estimate an average decrease of 40% in overall UK university research spend for the remainder of the academic year (May-Aug 2020).
- The majority of current charity-funded grants in universities are on hold.

2a. Risking a ‘lost generation’ of researchers and expertise

- AMRC charities collectively funded 17,000 researchers’ salaries across universities, the NHS and other bodies in 2019. This includes over 1,750 PhD students.

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2 Data does not include the Wellcome Trust
• A reduction in charity funded research will impact on the future skills pipeline, including PhD studentships, fellowships and other awards.
• Charities predict that early career researchers are most at risk including PhD students, postdocs and fellows. For many charities, PhD studentships and project grants make up the majority of their funding.
• More than half of AMRC's members indicated that the impact of COVID-19 on their research portfolio has, or will have, implications for the UK's ability to attract research talent and global research leadership.

2b. Impact on vital research studies to save and improve lives
• There will be significant impact to the clinical research that charities fund, which accounts for almost a third of the innovative non-commercial clinical research supported by the NIHR's Clinical Research Network. In 2018, AMRC's members recruited 212,000 participants onto over 1,300 charity-funded clinical studies or trials.
• 54% of clinical trials and studies funded by AMRC charities have been stopped, paused or delayed.
• Charity-funded trials are at risk of not being able to restart without additional funding or support. Nearly 40% of AMRC charities are concerned that over half of their clinical studies will be unable to restart.

2c. Delivering patient benefits: charities fund high-risk research
• Charities are typically disease specific and exist to support patients by funding research in areas of unmet need. They frequently fund high-risk, high-reward research in universities, where other funders typically do not.
• In 2018, AMRC charities invested £142 million into 640 rare disease research projects. Charities often provide the only investment in research for rare and less common conditions or provide seed funding that encourages others to invest.

2d. Charity-funded research contributes to the levelling up agenda
• A reduction in charity investment in research will hit some universities harder than others. Recent progress against the Government's ambition to level up economic opportunity across the UK could be undone.
• Medical research charities fund research in every region of the UK and last year almost half of charity funding was spent on research outside the ‘Golden Triangle’ of R&D.

3. The Life Sciences-Charity Partnership Fund
• Medical research charities are proposing a Life Sciences-Charity Partnership Fund to mitigate impact and ensure continuity of charity funded research.
• The Fund would be a government-charity co-investment scheme that provides a level of match funding from government for future charity research over the next three years.
• We are seeking at least £310 million of funding from government in FY20/21 to bridge the projected shortfall in sector spend. This funding would be matched by funding from charities to ensure overall sector investment is maintained.
• In partnership with Government, the Fund will preserve the vital and unique contributions of medical research charities, allowing them to continue to:
  o address unmet needs and fund research shaped by patients, carers and the public;
  o invest in high-risk early stage research, where few other investors will put their money;
  o support talent and skills, funding the salaries of over 17,000 researchers;
  o fund across the breadth of the UK so that research benefits every corner of the country;
  o leverage further funding from industry and philanthropy; and
  o be innovative, collaborative, ambitious and focused on real patient needs.
4. University research support package

- In June 2020, the Government announced the university research support package which aims to support universities to continue research and innovation activities. There are two parts of the package announced:
  - around £280 million government funding will be made available to universities and research organisations impacted by coronavirus for grant extensions, allowing them to continue developing research projects, funded through UK Research & Innovation (UKRI) and the National Academies.
  - from the Autumn, government will demonstrate its commitment to research by providing a package of support to research-active universities, consisting of long-term low-interest loans, supplemented by a small amount of government grant.

- Medical research charities welcome the immediate support for research in universities provided by the package. However, the package is not a long-term solution to the fall in charity investment in research as a result of the pandemic.

- While the package may be used by universities to cover some of the increased costs associated with their current charity-funded research, it will not help address the significant shortfall expected in spending by AMRC charities – an average 41% decrease in research spend in FY20/21.

- The university package is not a long-term solution to the challenges currently facing medical research charities. The package will be available until March 2021, whereas AMRC charities anticipate it will take much longer - 4.5 years on average - before their spend on research in UK universities fully recovers to normal levels.

- It remains unclear how the research support package directed towards universities could protect the future pipeline of charity-funded research.

- To preserve charity funded research in universities and the NHS in the long term, medical research charities are calling for a Life Sciences-Charity Partnership Fund (as detailed above).

“A statistic will never truly capture the devastating impact research cuts will have on all of us. Research is hope. Research is more time with your loved ones. Research is improved quality of life. Its value is immeasurable. By committing to a Life Sciences-Charity Partnership Fund Government can help deliver a better future for countless people across the UK”

Aisling Burnand MBE, Chief Executive of the Association of Medical Research Charities

For any questions regarding this briefing, please send an email to g.melvin@amrc.org.uk.