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Focus on science is right, but the education crisis needs much more attention

The Campaign for Science & Engineering (CaSE) today welcomed the Chancellor's focus on science in his Budget Speech, but warned that the nation's shortage of mathematics and scientific skills could be so severe that the UK cannot yet guarantee to succeed in high-technology business over the coming years.

"Gordon Brown mentioned the words 'science' and 'scientific' at least 17 times - more than in any of his previous Budgets," said Dr Peter Cotgreave, Director of CaSE, "and we welcome this focus.

"But he didn't do much to plug the massive shortage of maths and physics teachers. If the UK can't teach children basic mathematics in school, we have no chance of delivering the skilled workforce the Chancellor says he wants."

"Although we don't really like schools league tables, given that we're stuck with them, we welcome the inclusion of science in the benchmarks for schools, and the entitlement of all pupils to study separate science disciplines. Perhaps schools will be forced to appreciate the importance of science.

"However, if they can't recruit qualified teachers, it won't make any real difference."

CaSE provisionally welcomed the creation of a national medical research fund, if it means that the NHS research budget will be used more effectively, but CaSE will want to see the detail to ensure that the blue-skies research of the existing Medical Research Council is protected.

"CaSE certainly supports changes to the way the Higher Education Funding Council distributes money for research," said Peter Cotgreave "because the Research Assessment Exercise has been very destructive in recent years. But again we'll need to know more before we know whether the changes will allow universities to invest in the kind of curiosity-driven research that is being squeezed out of the system.

"The UK needs to drive down the costs of to industry of investing in research, so we welcome the fact that research tax credits will be slightly more generous, but the failure of the UK to attract investment in research is extremely severe – it fell in the UK last year while it rose in other industrialised nations.

"The Chancellor needs to look at the low corporation tax they have in Ireland, which has successfully attracted science investment, and he needs to revisit the rules on collaboration between industry and universities – even the pharmaceutical industry is now talking about it being too expensive to invest in British research."

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