

Massive cuts to projects supported by the UK's foreign aid budget risk devastating damage to the country's scientific reputation and raise questions about the direction of its research policy, according to sector leaders. One vice-president for research says UK Research and Innovation's move to halt funding for most projects under schemes such as the Global Challenges Research Fund and the Newton Fund, after reductions in government allocations, will be a blow to the UK's reputation as "the trusted partner of choice for many NGOs and [overseas] universities. Why would anyone want to risk working with us again?" she asks. Meanwhile, a former research council chief executive says the cuts also raise more fundamental questions about the rationale for UKRI. "When UKRI was created, the above-the-water reason was to promote interdisciplinarity but, below the water, there was an understanding that the Treasury would put a lot more money into science, but it didn't trust the sector to spend it, so a new framework was required," he says. "If these new funds are not going to persist, what value does this agency, which is a lot more bureaucratic and bigger than many expected, bring to science?". (F: THE 16.03.21)