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Our ref: 262564
Your Ref:

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Dear Professor Totaro,

THE FUTURE OF THE MATHEMATICAL SCIENCES IN THE UK

Thank you for your letter of 20 September to David Cameron, regarding the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council's (EPSRC) funding of mathematical sciences, co-signed by a range of distinguished academics. I am replying as this matter falls within my portfolio.

I understand that David Delpy has already written to you on this subject. I would however like to comment on a couple of points.

The Government recognises that STEM skills are vital to areas of future growth and employment. Mathematics is truly pervasive, underpinning many other research disciplines and contributing to advances made in many fields. Turning to the specific issue of EPSRC's support for fellowships in mathematical sciences, EPSRC in dialogue with the mathematics community is continuing to work on identifying other priority areas within the mathematical sciences – in addition to the initial areas of statistics and applied probability – and is expected to announce these in November. It is worth adding that fellowships are not the only mechanism for funding postdoctoral mathematics researchers as I understand that they can be employed on an EPSRC research grant.

EPSRC values the International Review of Mathematical Sciences and takes the recommendations of the review very seriously. EPSRC will be publishing an action plan shortly and has shared this with the Council for Mathematical Sciences. EPSRC is committed to ensuring that their engagement with all their researchers is as effective and productive as possible – mathematicians are no exception. One of the key points in the action plan will address how EPSRC communicates and engages more effectively with the community.

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The Haldane Principle means there are areas where Ministers should have no input: Ministers should not decide which individual projects should be funded nor which researchers should receive the money. The Government strongly supports the Haldane Principle and I published a statement of the Principle alongside the science and research funding allocations on 20 December 2010.

Of course every Government will have some key national strategic priorities. The research base has an important role to play in addressing such priorities and the Research Councils, with the support of independent advice, have proposed research programmes to tackle them. It is also appropriate for Ministers to ask Research Councils to consider how best they can contribute to these priorities, without crowding out other areas of their missions. However, it is for the Research Councils to decide on the specific projects and people to fund within these priorities, free from Ministerial interference.

I would encourage you to work together with EPSRC on this going forwards so that you can begin a productive dialogue on the future of the mathematical sciences in the UK.

I would be grateful if you could share my response with your co-signatories.

Yours sincerely
David Willetts

THE RT HON DAVID WILLETTS MP