

Research Councils UK opened in India

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With £48 million of investment in research projects in India by Research Councils UK in the past few years, Indian R&D is poised to benefit especially in the area of crop science.

It was in January 2008 that the Prime Ministers of India and the UK reiterated their commitment to increase the research collaboration between the UK and India and agreed to open Research Councils UK (RCUK) Office in India. Co-located with the Science and Innovation Network in the British High Commission, New Delhi, the new office was launched in New Delhi recently by Prof. John Beddington, chief scientific advisor for the UK. Also present at the occasion were Lord Kumar Bhattacharyya, director of the Warwick Manufacturing Group, Dr RA Mashelkar, president of the Global Research Alliance, and Professor Alan Thorpe, chief executive of the Natural Environment Research Council.

The RCUK office in India will work with Indian funding bodies to share strategies, increase dialogue on funding priorities, and pursue and promote collaborative research opportunities. It is aiming at a funding of £5 million for new research on energy, to be undertaken with Indian partners and focusing on priority areas such as solar energy by next year. Speaking on the occasion Prof. John Beddington, chief scientific advisor, said, "The opening of the RCUK Office in India is yet another demonstration of how the UK is recognizing the value of global collaboration in tackling future challenges. Working with partners in emerging economies is vital to bring about the best possible research outcomes. In this time of economic gloom and doom, it is important that we keep sight of the big picture and work together with global partners to achieve solutions."

The seven Research Councils are independent, non-departmental public bodies, funded by the Science and Research Budget through the Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS). They are incorporated by Royal Charter and together manage a research budget of around £3.4 billion a year. They are closely working with partners in India and in recent years an estimated £48 million of investment has been committed to research projects involving collaboration with Indian partners. The Biotechnology & Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC) on Sustainable Agricultural Research for International Development (SARID) along with the Department of International Development (DFID) is funding 12 projects worth £7.5 million out of which three of the top ranked applications (with a funding of nearly £1.9 million) involve institutions based in India.

Indian researchers from The Energy and Resources Institute, University of Delhi, Hamdard University, GP Pant University of Agriculture and Technology, Pantnagar and Krishidhan Seeds Ltd Jalna are working in collaboration with researchers at Rothamsted Research and the John Innes Centre in the UK supported by BBSRC on Brassica genetics to understand oilseed productivity and resistance to fungal disease. They hope this would not only help increase yields and quality by addressing crop traits affecting sustainable oil production for food and non-food use (including bioenergy). The two countries hope to benefit from each others expertise and there is more to come in the next few years.

Indian projects funded by SARID		
Indian university	Collaborating University	Project being worked upon
Calcutta University	University of Aberdeen, Bangladesh Agricultural University, The Chinese Academy of Sciences, The International Rice Research Institute, Rothamsted Research	Characterizing genetic and soil induced variation in arsenic uptake, translocation and metabolism in rice to mitigate arsenic contamination in Asia
ICRISAT, Patancheru	University of Sheffield, African Rice center	Unraveling molecular genetic basis of Striga resistance in cereals: integrating Quantitative trait loci (QTL) and genomic approaches)
ICRISAT and ICAR, Mandor, Jodhpur	Institute of Grassland and Environmental Research and the University of Cape Coast, Ghana.	Integrating genomics and mapping approaches to improve millet productivity in drought prone regions of Africa and Asia

"It's important to realize that we are in very dramatic times,"

Prof. John Beddington, chief scientific officer, the UK government.

What was the need behind setting up of the India office?

It's important to realize that we are in very dramatic times. We are facing global issues such as food security, water security, climate change and all these are interrelated. International collaboration is the key to solving these problems. India has an enormously successful program running in the area of food security, right from genomics to animal livestock production and the control of animal disease. With the opening up of the Delhi office we now have three offices outside the UK including Washington and Beijing.

What are some of the key issues of interest (especially in biotech) that the RCUK aims to work in India?

We recently attended a two-day India-UK food crop workshop at the Institute of Genomics and Department of Science & Technology (DST) and I see clearly important potential on plant genomics and plant biotechnology to plant diseases, resistance to drugs and saline conditions. We also see a potential in infectious diseases wherein Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC) is working along with the Department of International Development (DFID).

How was the response to the BBSRC India partnering awards?

The scheme is to provide resources to leading BBSRC-supported research groups to allow them to forge long-term relationships with Indian scientists in areas of research that are of direct relevance to BBSRC's current scientific strategy. The first call for the BBSRC India partnering awards was in 2006 and there was another last year and this year we are accepting proposals till 12 November 2008. An award of up to £25,000 is awarded for a period of four years for partnership with one or more Indian institutes. Since the launch of the scheme in September 2006, 11 partnering awards have been announced with a contribution from BBSRC of £250,000.

Shalini Gupta