

SA forms partnership with UK for scientific research

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Partnership will support collaborative projects between scientists in the UK and SA in health, the environment and food security

CAPE TOWN — Science and Technology Minister Naledi Pandor on Tuesday announced a new partnership for scientific research with the UK government, with a joint commitment of R140m a year for at least four years.

The partnership falls under the UK's Newton Fund, which has set aside £75m a year for five years for partnerships that promote the economic welfare of developing countries. The fund works with 15 countries, including SA's Brics partners Brazil, India and China. It will support collaborative projects between scientists in the UK and SA in health, the environment and food security.

Funds will be directed towards research that aims to improve SA's science and technology capacity, grow the economy, and create jobs, in line with the National Development Plan's aims, said UK Minister of State for Africa James Duddridge. "SA leads Africa in science and innovation (and is) a perfect fit with our ambitions for the Newton Fund to have a regional footprint."

Both countries are expected to work closely with African countries and to bring in private sector collaborators, such as UK drug maker GlaxoSmithKline, which has signed up to a project with the UK Medical Research Council and its South African counterpart. The UK was a significant contributor to global science, and the partnership offered "an enormous number of opportunities to work with the best in the world", Mr Duddridge said. International scientific collaboration was vital for tackling global challenges such as climate change, he said.

Ms Pandor said the partnership would prioritise human capital development. "Without the training of the next generation of scientists and engineers, neither country will achieve its objectives for increasing knowledge-based scientific activities," she said, before signing a memorandum of understanding with the UK.

"The focus on big data is particularly pleasing, as the UK and SA already co-operate within the SKA (Square Kilometre Array) project," she said.

GlaxoSmithKline and the medical research councils have formed a three-year partnership to collaborate in research on tuberculosis and non-communicable diseases. "We will be studying the gaps in our knowledge about the diversity of non-communicable diseases in Africa," said South African Medical Research Council president Glenda Gray.

The council had committed R30m to the project on noncommunicable diseases, while GlaxoSmithKline had agreed to put in £1m. There will also be joint research programmes on weather and climate science, and social science for development. Other activities include £1m in seed funding to support ties between institutions, which will be overseen by the UK's Medical Research Council and the Technology Innovation Agency.

The UK council will work with the Academy of Science of SA to support skills development, while the Royal Academies will work with the National Research Foundation to fund 90 fellowship and 150 mobility grants.