

INQUIRY SUBMISSION

MillionPlus response to the House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee inquiry into the role & priorities of the UKRI interim Chair

KEY POINTS

- The interim chair of UKRI will need to establish from the outset an operational framework that ensures effective collaboration and cooperation between what are currently 8 separate organisations and 1 directorate of a separate organisation
- The interim Chair should play a key role in provoking debate and scrutiny about the role and remit of Research England, including by Parliament
- The interim Chair will need to create mechanisms for ensuring that the sector does not lose any of the valuable oversight, advice and guidance that HEFCE currently provides
- The interim Chair should use the opportunity while UKRI is being established to continue the debate around research funding for UK universities, particularly on the question of whether the existing policies that lead to concentrated funding maximise the potential of the research undertaken by all universities
- The interim Chair needs to ensure Innovate UK is able to remain focused on research that makes a difference for businesses, public services and other organisations, and does not become the commercialisation arm of the research councils
- The interim Chair should encourage consideration by government of a new fund for applied or translational research that can be used by universities to support innovation in businesses, SMEs and public services to boost economic growth across the country
- The governance of UKRI needs to be managed so that the separate organisations are able to maintain a clear and distinct voice in their areas of expertise
- The Board of UKRI will need to represent the diversity of the sector. The Board of UKRI should draw expertise from the modern university sector, as well as from innovative areas of research and knowledge exchange. The interim Chair should look beyond the STEM disciplines for expertise, as well as considering those with experience in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland.
- The Chief Executive will need to be someone who is capable of bringing together the 9 currently separate organisations and structures that will comprise UKRI in a way that does not harm what those organisations currently offer the sector
- The Chief Executive will need to ensure that UKRI is not dominated by one or some of the organisations, but instead is a coherent organisation that understands the complex ecology of UK university research, innovation and knowledge exchange.
- The Chief Executive will need to be a champion of all forms of research at all universities
- The Chief Executive should be able to act robustly to defend the independence and autonomy of universities when it comes to funding and managing research.

THE ROLE AND OBJECTIVES OF THE INTERIM CHAIR OF UKRI

1. The interim chair of UKRI will need to establish from the outset an operational framework that ensures effective collaboration and cooperation between what are currently 8 separate organisations and 1 directorate of a separate organisations. This will need to be done in advance of the creation of UKRI in order to ensure that the new organisational structures are effective immediately.
 2. The current Higher Education and Research Bill brings the seven research councils, Innovate UK and the research directorate functions of HEFCE into the new organisation. Eight of these are distinct organisations, and so there is some familiarity with how they work in their own right. However, Research England, the new committee of UKRI taking on the current research functions¹ of HEFCE, creates in effect a new organisation from what is currently a department within another organisation. This means that there is less clarity with how this new organisation will be organised and staffed.
 3. The Bill is also vague around the remit of Research England, and what direction it will have under UKRI. With such an important role it is concerning that so little is within the legislation setting out what it should be mandated to do. The interim Chair should play a key role in provoking debate and scrutiny about the role and remit of Research England, including by Parliament. Two particular concerns are a) ensuring that knowledge exchange will be added in the Bill as a key responsibility of Research England and b) identifying how support for postgraduate taught and research students will be managed and funded. HEFCE currently supports and funds these students² but it is unclear if this function will stay with the new Office for Students or move with Research England to UKRI. These is an important question that needs to be considered in detail to allow the sector to consider the various advantages and disadvantages.
 4. The interim Chair will also need to consider how UKRI and the OfS will work together in the future. The shift away from one overarching organisation with oversight of teaching, research and knowledge exchange in universities in England to two separate organisations, each with their own remits and responsibilities, has the potential to create gaps in the holistic understanding of higher education. It will be for the Chairs, Chief Executives and staff of both organisations to ensure create mechanisms for ensuring that the sector does not lose any of the valuable oversight, advice and guidance that HEFCE currently provides. The Bill may well be a route to achieving some of this, but it will also come in the form of strategic vision, governance conditions and working practice. The role of the interim Chair of UKRI in setting the right tone for this future collaboration is crucial.
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 - The interim Chair should play a key role in provoking debate and scrutiny about the role and remit of Research England, including by Parliament
 - The interim Chair will need to create mechanisms for ensuring that the sector does not lose any of the valuable oversight, advice and guidance that HEFCE currently provides

¹ The Bill is unclear on whether Research England will take on knowledge exchange and postgraduate funding and support functions conducted by HEFCE.

² HEFCE does not fund all research students, as research council awards are also a source of funding

EARLY PRIORITIES FOR ACTION

5. The timetable of the Bill is arguably moving quicker than is desired, particularly given the uncertainty created by Brexit and the consequences of leaving the European Union on the UK's universities from the perspective of research investment and student recruitment. However, notwithstanding any objections to this timetable, MillionPlus believes that it is vital that the interim Chair uses the opportunity while UKRI is being established to continue the debate around research funding for UK universities. The period leading up to the creation of UKRI should be used to consider whether the UK is maximising the potential of the research undertaken by all universities.
6. The policies of successive governments have created a disproportionate and concentrated research funding system that threatens the long-term sustainability of substantial amounts of research. Despite the demonstrable success highlighted by the assessments of the 2014 research excellence framework, new analysis conducted by MillionPlus shows that in 2015/16 just three universities (2% of the HE sector in England) received 25% of the funding allocated on the basis of these assessments. By comparison, 77 universities (64% of the HE sector in England), shared only 10% of the available funding allocated on the basis of the research excellence framework assessments.³
7. The reality of policies such as these is that the government is failing to build on the achievements of universities that support growth in local economies across the UK. This concentration of funding, and the possible adverse consequences of it, is recognised by the government. Shortly after his appointment as Universities and Science Minister, Jo Johnson MP said in a speech (MillionPlus emphasis):
 - a. ***"At present, 46% of public investment in research goes to the golden triangle. This reflects the strength of internationally-renowned universities in London, Oxford and Cambridge. We must and we will continue to fund research on the basis of excellence and ensure we are competing with the very best in the world.***
 - b. ***But we do have to ensure we recognise that other parts of the country have proven research excellence in their universities, and ensure we fund excellence wherever it is found in order to realise the productivity gains that we have seen in the Golden Triangle. To achieve this, we need a new approach – one that promotes and protects our reputation for world-class science, and also drives growth and raises productivity for the whole of the UK."***⁴
8. The interim Chair of UKRI should use the time leading up to the creation of the new organisation to ask questions about this research concentration, and how research funding can be better invested to benefit all of the country. Part of this debate will need to be a discussion about the status of and funding for Innovate UK within the new organisation. It is imperative that Innovate UK is able to remain focused on research that makes a difference for businesses, public services and other organisations. It would be to the detriment of the sector if Innovate UK was refashioned as a commercialisation arm of all or any of the research councils. It needs to continue to be able to respond to the needs of industry, particularly SMEs, in working with universities to apply and translate research to solve the challenges facing businesses. The sector needs a truly collaborative relationship between higher education and business, not one based on

³ See *Is science and research funding in higher education meeting the challenges of the 21st century*, MillionPlus, September 2016: <http://www.millionplus.ac.uk/policy/policy-briefings/policy-briefing-is-science-and-research-funding-in-higher-education-meeting-the-challenges-of-the-2>

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/one-nation-science>, Jo Johnson MP, 16 July 2015

competition for resources. Innovate UK must be a truly collaborative partner, bringing the sector and business together.

9. This debate should include consideration of a new fund for applied or translational research that can be used by universities to support innovation in businesses, SMEs and public services to boost economic growth across the country. Modern universities have strong track records in this area, demonstrating excellent impact, but receive less funding proportionately than other universities because of the focus of the way funding is concentrated. A key priority for UKRI will be to challenge government to ensure investment is more balanced. This is particularly important for some of the work that is done by modern universities to support innovation in businesses and industry that creates and sustains jobs in a region, but does not fit into the traditional understanding of research. As such, it is often not recognised in the research excellence framework, which in turn means there is no obvious source of investment for this activity.
 - The interim Chair should use the opportunity while UKRI is being established to continue the debate around research funding for UK universities, particularly on the question of whether the existing policies that lead to concentrated funding maximise the potential of the research undertaken by all universities
 - The interim Chair needs to ensure Innovate UK is able to remain focused on research that makes a difference for businesses, public services and other organisations, and does not become the commercialisation arm of the research councils
 - The interim Chair should encourage consideration by government of a new fund for applied or translational research that can be used by universities to support innovation in businesses, SMEs and public services to boost economic growth across the country

GOVERNANCE OF UKRI

10. Through the Bill the seven research councils, Innovate UK and the new Research England will be subsumed as committees into UKRI, and the research councils will lose their royal charters. An argument in favour of this change is that a CEO of UKRI, with the other organisations reporting in to this role, will enable the organisation to act more consistently and coherently. While this may be an opportunity with the creation of UKRI, it is also a risk that a perception is created that the current organisations are being downgraded and demoted in the research hierarchy. This in turn may reduce the power and influence of the research councils, and have an impact on the way they are viewed, and the leadership they will be able to both project and attract, which could do damage to the reputation of UK research both domestically and internationally.
11. It is therefore vital that the governance of UKRI is managed so that the separate organisations are able to maintain a clear and distinct voice in their areas of expertise. In order to recruit sector leaders to head up the new committees, with the requisite credibility, respect and experience, the roles will need to have key strategic responsibilities. It will be difficult to attract individuals at the same level as some of the current heads of those organisations (e.g. at the level of at least Pro-Vice Chancellor) if they do not feel there is scope to lead, shape and guide the sector.
12. The Board of UKRI will need to be representative of the diversity of the sector. The panel advising the Stern Review of the Research Excellence Framework received criticism from some in the sector, including

MillionPlus,⁵ for lacking representation from across the sector and the UK. The Board of UKRI should draw expertise from the modern university sector, as well as from innovative areas of research and knowledge exchange. The interim Chair should also look beyond the STEM disciplines for expertise, as well as considering those with experience in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland.

13. The creation of UKRI and the OfS, and the dividing up of responsibilities runs the risk of the sector losing an organisation with clear holistic oversight. The removal of a direct link between research and the other elements crucial to higher education could see these bodies work in silo and move the sector in different directions. This could be potentially even more damaging in a post-Brexit world with many within higher education already feeling uncertain of the future and looking for stability and a measure of continuity. The governance of UKRI (and that of the OfS) should ensure that there are strong links between all parts of the sector, and that the two organisations do not work in isolation. Finding opportunities to build this into governance structures (for example, by being represented on each other's boards) and to working practices (e.g. through an annual report on the health of the sector) will be vital.
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THE APPOINTMENT OF A CHIEF EXECUTIVE OF UKRI

14. The individual that takes up the role of Chief Executive will need to be someone who can command credibility and respect across a diverse sector. They will need to be someone who is capable of bringing together the 9 currently separate organisations and structures that will comprise UKRI in a way that does not harm what those organisations currently offer the sector. The Chief Executive will also need to ensure that UKRI is not dominated by one or some of the organisations, but instead is a coherent organisation that understands the complex ecology of UK university research, innovation and knowledge exchange. The role, contribution and value of all universities, including modern universities, must be emphasised. The Chief Executive will need to be a champion of all forms of research at all universities, rather than focusing on a small section of the sector.
15. The Chief Executive will also need to promote, and if necessary defend, the sector from excessive political interference. The government has repeatedly stated that the Bill enshrines the principle of 'dual-support' into legislation, whereby funding for research is allocated to universities for them to use at their discretion, rather than for specific projects (as is the case with the research councils). In addition, the principle of dual support is backed up by the Haldane Principle, whereby the Secretary of State and Research England (as is the case now with HEFCE) cannot dictate to universities how they can allocate the funding they receive.
16. It is therefore incumbent on the Chief Executive to ensure that this becomes reality in the way in which governments and UKRI work together in the future. The Chief Executive will need to avoid these external

⁵ <http://www.millionplus.ac.uk/news/press-releases/million-comments-on-the-stern-review-of-university-research-funding>

pressures dictating the direction of UKRI, and the 9 individual committees. There will certainly be a need to consider the views of government, and it will obviously play an influencing role, but the Chief Executive should be able to act robustly to defend the independence and autonomy of universities when it comes to funding and managing research.

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