



The British Academy

Response – Higher Education and Research Bill Public Bill Committee

Background

The [Higher Education Bill](#) was introduced to the House of Commons and given its First Reading on 19th May 2016. As far as the UK's research funding architecture is concerned, further to the High Education White Paper [Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice, Part 3](#) of the Bill proposes that the Research Councils along with Innovate UK are merged into UK Research and Innovation (UKRI).

HEFCE will be broken-up: elements of it will become the Office for Students (OfS) (this will administer the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)) and the research arm will become Research England, which will be brought under UKRI to administer the REF and distribute Quality Related funding in England.

Context

- a. Research and innovation lie at the heart of economic growth, creativity and culture in the UK and will be crucial as the UK redefines its role in the world.
- b. UK research is extraordinarily productive and distinguished by international standards, but we underinvest in it as a percentage of GDP relative to the OECD average and markedly so relative to our comparators.
- c. The Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) are a vital part of research and innovation and their contribution to the UK's economic growth, creativity and culture. The UK is primarily a service economy (78%), and a growing services sector needs a growing supply of HSS-skilled graduates. Insights from the humanities, social and natural sciences are required to address the most pressing societal challenges and existing barriers to interdisciplinarity should be removed.
- d. In the context of points, a, b and c, above, UKRI should drive forward a positive, strategic and expanded role for research, fulfilling the aims of the Nurse Review of the Research Councils, by building a research strategy and associated investment that operate on a bigger scale and still more strategically, coherently, effectively, and efficiently.

The National Academies recently produced a briefing containing probing amendments to the Bill, available [here](#). In order to support scrutiny of the Bill, the National Academies also produced a visual map of the proposed changes, available [here](#).

The British Academy's concerns

Outlined below are the concerns which the British Academy will monitor most closely as the Bill progresses through Parliament, namely:

1. the interaction between teaching and research
2. the protection of dual support
3. governance, strategy and the Haldane Principle
4. structures matter to delivery
5. interdisciplinarity and UKRI
6. a broad sense of 'science'
7. the notions of wellbeing and quality of life

1. The interaction between teaching and research

- 1.1 The break-up of HEFCE and the creation of UKRI and the OfS separates the organisations with oversight of teaching and research. There are clear, overlapping areas of concern between teaching and research, such as the health of disciplines and skills development. Moreover, elements of the academic career, such as postgraduate training, do not fall neatly within an organisation with responsibility solely for teaching or for research. Strong postgraduate training is an essential link in the chain between teaching and research and its diversity and spread helps underpin the health of a UK-wide research base.
- 1.2 The splitting of oversight of research and teaching at a governmental level between the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Department for Education respectively, risks underscoring this separation between two interlinked functions of universities. There is a clear need for formal links to be made between the two functions.
- 1.3 The National Academies have suggested in their probing amendments that a member of the OfS board have observer status on the UKRI board, and vice versa. This is one mechanism by which a formal link could be maintained. The British Academy, alongside the other National Academies, will also seek to play a more prominent role in the oversight of strategic and vulnerable subjects in a landscape that does not provide a locus of support for this activity.

2. The protection of Dual Support

- 2.1 In its response to the Green Paper, the Academy recommended that the protection of dual support should be enshrined in legislation. Dual support is central to the continued success and strength of a diverse, UK-wide research base, to the benefit of students and the economy.
- 2.2 For research in HSS, QR funding is more significant than for other subject areas. The UK-wide spread of QR funding enables research in HSS to flourish; increased centralisation of funding risks undermining this.
- 2.3 The Academy welcomes the legal protection for QR funding afforded in the current wording of the Bill. However, while dual support is protected through Research England in the Bill, the current balance between Research England and other

Research Councils would not necessarily be maintained within UKRI. The Academy would like to see further detail on how an appropriate balance between the two funding streams within dual support will be determined within UKRI.

3. Governance, Strategy and The Haldane Principle

- 3.1 The Bill must strike the right balance between strategic direction for research and allowing decisions on specific research agendas to be set by experts. The Haldane Principle is widely recognised as a guiding principle for the distribution of research funding, whereby research experts determine the direction of research programmes. The Government's recent White Paper stated the Government's commitment to the Haldane Principle.
- 3.2 In the current wording of the Bill, the Secretary of State is afforded significant power in determining the research agenda of UKRI. For example, the current language in the Bill is permissive around the extent of consultation that the Secretary of State must undertake before adding or omitting a Council or changing its name or function. It would be valuable for consultation with the research community to be integral to any agenda setting strategy by UKRI or the Secretary of State.
- 3.3 In addition, the Academy recommends that the Secretary of State be formally required to consult with, at least, the President of the relevant National Academy before appointing a Research Council Executive Chair.

4. Structures matter to delivery

- 4.1 The Nurse Review of the Research Councils recommended the creation of a committee of Executive Chairs of the Councils, which would include the CEO of UKRI, to provide a link to UKRI's governing board. The Academy recommends that a link between the Board of UKRI and the Executive Chairs of the Research Councils should be made clear in the Bill.
- 4.2 Again, ensuring that the Haldane principle is respected, the research community should be reassured that the strategic direction of UKRI is based on expert knowledge from within the research community.
- 4.3 In addition, placing an England-only organisation, Research England, within a UK wide structure, UKRI, will also have to be managed carefully. QR funding helps to fund the best research, wherever it is found around the UK. The Academy recommends that the Bill reflect the practical need that will exist for Research England to consult with its partner bodies in the devolved nations.

5. Interdisciplinarity and UKRI

- 5.1 Interdisciplinary research has been vital to creativity and to fundamental advance within disciplines. Insights from across the disciplinary spread are needed to tackle the pressing issues facing societies, as was made clear in the Academy publication 'Prospering Wisely'¹. The Stern Review of the Research Excellence Framework (REF)

¹ <http://www.britac.ac.uk/prosperingwisely/>

recognised the core contribution of interdisciplinarity and suggested pragmatic mechanisms to encourage it within the REF, which the Academy trusts will be given serious consideration by Government.

- 5.2 The Academy's recent report on interdisciplinary research, 'Crossing Paths'², makes recommendations about the appropriate funding and evaluation of interdisciplinary research. Importantly, this report emphasises that interdisciplinary research should not be equated solely with challenge-led research; any funding pot for interdisciplinary research should recognise this.
- 5.3 The Nurse Review of the Research Councils recommended that there should be a common research pot for the funding of explicitly interdisciplinary research. One of the rationales provided by Nurse for the creation of Research UK, on which UKRI is modelled, was to encourage greater cross-Council collaboration and support for cross-cutting, interdisciplinary research. The Bill does not specify whether such a common-pot of funding will be established; the Academy would welcome further details on these plans.

6. A broad sense of 'science' is fundamental

- 6.1 Definitions of science in the Bill frequently neglect to explicitly include the arts, humanities and social sciences. While Part 3, Clause 102 of the Bill ('Definitions') makes it clear that the definition of "science" includes social science and "humanities" includes the arts, it would be better to have the arts, humanities and social sciences explicitly recognised throughout the language of the Bill given their vital role in research and innovation. The UK's economy is a knowledge economy dominated by the service sectors. These service sectors are core areas of innovation and HSS research in our universities and research centres are fundamental underpinnings for and sources of that innovation.

7. The notions of wellbeing and quality of life are key

- 7.1 The Academy recommends that a broader notion of quality of life should be captured in the Bill, drawing on, for example, the Academy publication 'Prospering Wisely'. In the National Academies' probing amendments, the language of 'social and cultural wellbeing' was suggested in addition to 'quality of life'.
- 7.2 This would echo the importance that was placed on a broad notion of 'impact' in the recent Stern review of the Research Excellence Framework, whereby impact "need not solely focus on socioeconomic impacts but should also include impact on government policy, on public engagement and understanding, on cultural life, on academic impacts outside the field, and impacts on teaching."³

²<http://www.britac.ac.uk/interdisciplinarity>

³https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/541338/ind-16-9-ref-stern-review.pdf

Further information:

The Academy's [response to the Nurse Review of the Research Councils is available here](#).

The Academy's [response to the higher education green paper is available here](#).

The Academy's [response to the House of Commons Select Committee enquiry on the impact on science and research of leaving the EU is available here](#).

The National Academies also produced a [joint statement after the decision to leave the EU, available here](#).

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