

**INTERNATIONAL POLICIES AND ACTIVITIES OF THE  
RESEARCH COUNCILS**

**Executive Summary**

1. Current Research Council initiatives to facilitate international research collaborations and future international facilities strategies should be supported. More could be done to simplify travel grant applications and to facilitate universities being able to recruit the best research students world-wide into studentships sponsored by the Research Councils.

**Introduction**

2. The Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE) is pleased to respond to the House of Commons Science and Technology Inquiry into the international policies and activities of the Research Councils. These comments have been compiled with the assistance of a number of expert Fellows of the RSE, under the direction of the Vice-President, Professor John Mavor.
3. The different issues of consideration by the Committee are addresses below:

**The strengths and weaknesses of existing Research Council and OSI mechanisms and activities to maintain and promote international collaboration**

*International facilities*

4. In the past, the UK has been hindered by a lack of strategic direction by the Office of Science and Innovation on a future strategy for domestic and overseas facilities. The new Science and Technology Facilities Council will now be able to address this issue and should be given a clear mandate to progress the UK position.

*Multinational research collaborations*

5. More could be done to support international collaborations with multinational agency funding. We support the EPSRC' current efforts to establish arrangements with funding bodies in other countries to facilitate substantial research collaborations, by requiring approval only once, rather than multiple times, for such projects. The EPSRC has also been flexible when research programme initiatives have required industrial collaboration involving non-UK owned companies.

*Travel grants*

6. There would be merit in simpler and quicker methods for providing UK Research Council funds for travel grants, workshops and visiting researchers. At present they need to be applied for in a form similar to larger responsive mode grants, which is disproportionate to the value of the grant.

### **The effectiveness of the Research Councils' and OSI's international policies in respect of International collaboration through the EU Framework Programme**

7. There is a role for the various minor funding schemes that support the costs of trying to set up Framework Programme (FP) collaborations. However, the geopolitical and budgetary aspects of EU research funding decisions (to date) would be cause for concern, were the Research Councils to jointly fund FP-type projects. Nevertheless, we welcome the creation of the European Research Council (ERC) and are pleased that it will fund the highest quality work in basic or "frontier" research. The ERC has the potential to be major influence in strengthening fundamental research capacity in the universities, provided that it is sufficiently well funded. It should be exclusively concerned with funding "bottom up" proposals, with excellence as the only criterion, and with the allocation of long term fellowships designed to attract the best research talents and as a means to develop a stream of researchers who will generate the foundation of European research in the 21st century.
8. There are also concerns about how EU Framework funding models can be reconciled with the full economic costing models with which UK universities must work, and how such models will be able to cover the full costs of research carried out under their auspices. The level of overheads provided on European projects, (even after the present costing transparency exercise,) will not cover these full costs. Consideration could be given to the Research Councils providing funds to support the home share of costs of successful FP grant applicants. This would be a strong incentive to institutions to back bids for FP funds and would increase the probability of the UK obtaining its 'juste retour', or more, from available EU funds.

### **The effectiveness of collaboration between the Research Councils and the Government Departments involved in international scientific activities**

9. There are tensions between Government Departments and Research Councils in international scientific activities. The research required by the Department for International Development in addressing Third World problems is often more strategic or applied, whereas the agendas and metrics driving the Research Councils are more focused on basic high-quality research.
10. When considering such collaboration, it will also be important to involve the Scottish Executive, and the Scottish Executive's new Chief Scientific Advisor, in informing Research Council international scientific activities.

### **The impact of the Research Councils' policies on the international mobility of scientists and engineers**

11. A major mobility mechanism is the provision of research studentships for graduates from overseas (e.g. for PhD study). At present, however, it is not possible to offer full RC support (fees plus stipend) to research students coming from outside of the UK. The UK would benefit significantly from universities being able to recruit the best research students world-wide into studentships sponsored by the Research Councils.

## **Additional Information**

12. The Royal Society of Edinburgh offers a range of international travel grants and has established a Committee on International links. The objectives of the Society's international policy include the provision of international exchange programmes that enable increased international contact and collaboration between Scottish and overseas researchers and scholars. Bilateral Programmes have been established with:

- the Chinese Academy of Sciences
- the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic
- the Hungarian Academy of Sciences
- the Polish Academy of Sciences
- the Slovak Academy of Sciences
- the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts
- the National Science Council of Taiwan

There is also an Open Programme of exchanges that allow researchers to further collaborations with research groups in countries (non-UK) or institutes not covered by the bilateral programme.

13. Any enquiries about this submission should be addressed to the RSE's Research Officer, Dr Marc Rands (email: [evidenceadvice@royalsoced.org.uk](mailto:evidenceadvice@royalsoced.org.uk)).

April 2007