

# *The* Royal Society *of* Edinburgh

## **On Delivering More Effective Government: Proposed Government Institute/Commission Mergers**

1. The Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE), Scotland's National Academy, established a working group of Fellows with a range of experiences and knowledge in the relevant fields and about the Scottish science base to comment on the proposed Government Institute/Commission mergers. The group was led by the General Secretary, Professor Boulton, and a list of members is enclosed as an appendix. If the Scottish Government wishes to discuss these issues further, the RSE would be happy to arrange for members of the group to be available for a meeting.
2. We understand the desire of the Scottish Government to simplify public services with the intention of improving integration and achieving best value for public money in research in the cognate areas of rural, agricultural, terrestrial land-use and marine environmental management. However, rather than moving immediately to consider possible re-combinations and mergers between existing bodies, it is important first to review the principles that should underlie reorganisation in these fields.
3. They are crucial areas internationally and for Scotland. Over the last three years, world food supplies have been increasingly under strain, as a result of population growth, improved standards of living for many people, especially in Asia, the utilization of grain crops for bio-fuels, and the incidence of drought in some exporting countries leading to crop failure. These trends have led to a steep rise in commodity prices that could create pressure for re-intensification of European agriculture. At the same time, climate change is likely have major impacts on the Scottish environment and its use, and to lead to the introduction of pathogens and pests of agricultural crops and forests that are new to Scotland, together with the perennial risk of far-travelled, animal-borne infection. There is also greater awareness of the need for better management of the marine environment and conservation of its biodiversity.
4. These issues require that the research base in Scotland is excellent by international standards; that it is well-adapted to current needs and efficient in responding to them, whilst being able to adapt flexibly to new, unanticipated needs as they arise; is internally well-networked so that issues that require cross-discipline collaboration can be readily addressed; and that it is well-connected to policy-making processes at both national and local levels. Moreover, it is crucial that time-worn institutional categories that ignore the interconnectedness of the terrestrial and marine environments do not impede any reorganisation of provision.
5. It is also important that any reorganisation is based on a carefully-posed set of requirements for research, and that some principles of institutional function are recognised if mistakes that have been committed elsewhere are not to be repeated in Scotland. In this regard, we are deeply concerned about the piecemeal nature of the proposals and the apparent absence of vision or prior rationale. Reorganisation may need to be repeated in a short time frame if the current process is ill-judged.

6. An effective research base in the domain of land and marine management needs to have the following attributes:
  - **Basic research** that explores the fundamentals of relevant phenomena, that provides the fundamental underpinning for current issues, that is sufficiently broadly-based to adapt to emergent issues, and is of sufficient quality to ensure that Scotland is able to benefit from its international links and from external funding.
  - **Strategic research** that focuses on specific, often long-term issues of importance to Scotland.
  - **Knowledge transfer functions** that have three foci:
    - an outreach function able readily and accessibly to provide advice to the users and managers of the Scottish land and marine environment;
    - commercialisation of new products and processes;
    - contractual services, including internationally.
  - **Policy-driven research** and involvement in the policy creation process.
  - **Statutory function** fulfilment.
7. It is important that the effectiveness of any reorganisation is tested against its capacity to deliver these functions. A solution that might seem an effective contribution to “the bonfire of quangos” is no solution if it fails to create a set of institutions that are able efficiently to deliver the outcomes described above. If the Government is serious in wishing to achieve the latter, and prepared to be bold in doing so, and in preparing the land and marine research base for the crucial challenges it has to face, we would recommend that it sets up a review body, with significant independent, including international, membership. The RSE would be happy to contribute its good offices in helping to create such a group if so desired.
8. A well-known dilemma for governments in delivering strategically important research surrounds the kind of organisation best suited to be the vehicle for the research. In the past, governments have tended to set up specialist institutes with a well-defined remit. These are highly efficient means of pursuing strategic research as long as the need for that research persists. However this strategy can lead to inflexibilities in the longer term. As the research agenda changes, old activities become redundant, and there is a demand for quite new capabilities, to which pre-existing specialist institutes often find it difficult to adapt by changing their skill sets. Contracts, pensions, lobbying by local representatives and even attachment to an institute’s name, all conspire to inhibit desirable change.
9. An increasingly favoured alternative is to transfer the activity into a university. Because of their greater size and diversity, they are able more readily to reconfigure their activities in order to follow new research priorities without major dislocation. However, partly because of the prevalent regime of short-term research grants, partly because academic reputation is more frequently based on achievements in basic research, it much is much more difficult to maintain long-term strategic research activity in a university. To do so requires long-term (order 6-10 years) commitments to strategic research funding with the option for longer term continuation. One such example of this is the long term environmental monitoring and maintenance of collections such as the soil collection at the Macaulay Institute.
10. One possible amalgamation model would be for the Scottish Agricultural College to form the core of a Scottish Land-Use University. The move for the Scottish Funding Council to provide funding for degree programmes at the college is a step in this direction. Alternatively, the SAC could become integrated into current university structures. The resulting amalgamation, on whatever model, could then become part of a land-use pooling exercise, similar to that for physics, chemistry and engineering, which would provide a structure within which the best researchers could work together, drawing on the expertise of the Scottish Government Rural and

Environment Research and Analysis Directorate's Main Research Providers, and higher education institutions such as the Universities of Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Stirling and the UHI Millennium Institute.

11. We recognise that many have argued that Scotland has "enough universities". However, the diversity of university function in Scotland is limited. Its HEIs have converged in structure, function and mission, and much could be gained by greater diversity in these attributes, even if the SFC, for managerial reasons might find this awkward to contemplate.
12. We are also very aware of the problems of creating single, virtual institutes from widely spaced components. It is often an expensive route in which efficiency and flexibility are sub-optimal. We suspect that if on occasions such as this, radical options are not reviewed, including relocation of some functions, the need for more difficult, even more radical intervention often becomes necessary at a later date.
13. We also wish to make a number of more specific points that relate to the marine environment. The marine and coastal environment needs to be considered alongside the strategies for the terrestrial environment of Scotland and it is particularly important to include the coastal zone in our thinking, as this often falls into the cracks between terrestrial and marine responsibilities. Consequently, we support the creation of a single Scottish Marine Management organization but believe there is a role for the wider research community, including bodies such as the Scottish Association of Marine Science (SAMS), to provide the supporting research, including data collection and a scientific advisory service for Government. Moreover, given the cost of marine science, a more comprehensive view of the options should have been taken. Marine Science Scotland, a pooling initiative within the academic community, could be adapted as a vehicle to provide this future research and advisory capacity, and this initiative should be continued and expanded.

#### **Further contact**

14. Members of the working group within the RSE would be pleased to meet with the Scottish Government if this would be helpful. If this would be of interest please contact Dr Marc Rands, Evidence & Advice Manager, at the RSE ([mrands@royalsoced.org.uk](mailto:mrands@royalsoced.org.uk)).

#### **Appendix**

Fellows of the Royal Society of Edinburgh involved in producing this submission were:

Professor G Boulton (Chair & General Secretary)

Professor I L Boyd

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