

Science Consultation
c/o Fiona Mackay
Bay 365
Office of Science and Technology
1 Victoria Street
London SW1H 0ET

15 June 2006

Dear Ms Mackay,

I am writing on behalf of the Academy of Social Sciences in response to your invitation for comments on the document, *Science and innovation investment framework 2004-2014*.

The Academy of Social Sciences represents 430 Academicians, distinguished scholars and practitioners from academia and the public and private sectors, and 30 Learned Societies from across the social sciences. It was established in 2000.

Our responses to your discussion questions are:

- 1. The Government would be interested in views about whether the existing framework for supporting science and innovation enables an appropriate level of risk-taking, and if not, suggestions of how any gap might be addressed.*

The Academy endorses the document's view of science and innovation as an 'ecosystem' and welcomes the adoption of a more holistic perspective on innovation. While there is no explicit mention of the major contribution that the social sciences can make – the social sciences are hardly mentioned as separate from science throughout the document – we would like to make it clear that social scientific research has already made a substantial contribution to describing and understanding this ecosystem and could in future make an even greater one.

The Academy suggests that the appropriate way to develop a framework to enable an appropriate level of risk taking is to **base policy on social scientific evidence**. While

it is valuable to seek the views of stakeholders, for example through this consultation, it is no substitute for careful social scientific data collection and analysis.

Extensive ongoing research funded by ESRC (see, for example, the current Sustainable Technologies Programme) has revealed the importance of social dimensions to the successful uptake and implementation of innovations. A growing investment in R&D is necessary if the UK is to remain competitive, but on its own is insufficient. Social (and therefore political) barriers to change have to be much better understood if that investment is to provide value for money, and only social science research can provide the essential insights.

2. The Government invites views on measures to remove any remaining bias which unfairly favours established research fields over innovative ones. The Government also invites views on how funding mechanisms can be made more responsive to new research challenges.

In the social sciences, the Economic and Social Sciences Research Council has a very long-standing policy of evaluating research proposals irrespective of their disciplinary origin and the Academy strongly supports this approach. The Academy does not see any significant ‘remaining bias’ within the social sciences that favours established research fields and there is some evidence of increasing inter-disciplinarity. There still remain some difficulties about evaluating proposals that cross the boundaries between Research Councils, but the situation has improved greatly over the last decade.

The Academy does however consider that the ESRC’s peer review mechanism can often be risk-averse, a problem made worse by the high proportion of ‘alpha-rated’ (i.e. high quality) proposals that are not supported because of a shortage of funds. In a situation of severe budgetary constraints on the ESRC (the Council receives only 5.37% of the total research council spending), it is inevitable that high risk proposals will be less favoured. We therefore suggest that a fixed **proportion of ESRC’s support should be ring-fenced** to support multi-disciplinary or problem-focussed, high risk proposals that have the potential to make significant long-tem breakthroughs. (This is a policy used, *inter alia*, by the European Commission’s Framework Programme).

3. *The Government would welcome views on the barriers limiting greater business innovation and business-university collaboration in the regions, and on what more could be done on a national and regional level to tackle these barriers effectively.*

The Academy notes that the document seems almost exclusively concerned with ‘business’ and with ‘products’, which implies that these alone contribute to the UK’s wealth and quality of life. **Equal attention should be paid to innovation in services, and in the public, voluntary and third sectors.** For example, why are there no KTNs concerned with financial services, education, public administration or the leisure and tourist industries?

We believe that there are rich opportunities for knowledge transfer and knowledge sharing in these areas that will lead to gains for the UK more quickly and more effectively than yet more attempts to interest the ‘usual suspects’ in business.

The Academy believes that **the social sciences have much more to offer existing KTNs, KPTs and other knowledge sharing initiatives than is currently recognised**, in areas such as management, human resources, education and organisational change. More needs to be done both within Government and within the social science community itself to make the actual and potential contribution of the social sciences more visible.

It is vital that the health of the science base (including social science and the humanities) is maintained throughout the nation. Social science research demonstrates that knowledge transfers are most often local (which is one reason for the effectiveness of science parks, industrial districts and innovation clusters). Allowing the science base to wither in a region curtails the innovation potential of that region. It notes that one major cause of differences in the science base among English regions is HEFCE’s policy of research selectivity, which provides the majority of QR funding to highly rated or elite University departments. While possibly sensible for some science subjects requiring expensive apparatus, this policy neglects the economic consequences of withdrawing support from large swathes of the country, and has little or no rationale for the majority of social science disciplines, which do not use expensive technological infrastructure. **The Academy recommends that the policy of research selectivity needs reconsideration.**

4. *The Government would welcome views - in particular from outside Higher Education - which can be taken into account in developing best practice models for business/university collaboration. In addition, the Government would welcome views on how to encourage businesses to work with universities for the first time, perhaps by introducing short-term, low-cost mechanisms for business-university interaction.*

The Academy concurs with the view that innovation requires substantial risk-taking and notes that research risks are only likely to be taken in an atmosphere of mutual trust between researchers and research users. Such **trust requires a sense of partnership built up over a period of time**. The current commissioning and grant awarding arrangements of Government Departments and Research Councils, which focus on single projects and short timescales with specified results delivered within the project timescale, make such partnerships very difficult to maintain. We therefore support the Research Councils' move towards "providing more flexible, long-term programme funding" (para. 2.10) but consider that there still needs to be much more movement in this direction.

Knowledge is best transferred through the movement of people, and so **schemes that make it easier for established academics to spend time in industry, government or the voluntary sector** where their knowledge can be put to use, and **easier for personnel in these sectors to contribute their skills and experience to university teaching and research** should be encouraged. While some such schemes do exist¹, they tend to be confined to engineering and have difficulty over issues such as maintaining pension rights and comparable pay scales. This is an area where government support could oil the wheels at little cost and with very great effect.

5. *The Government would welcome views on whether all large facilities operations should be integrated under a new Large Facilities Council, or whether there is a case for some facilities to remain under the management of other Research Councils.*

No comment

¹ E.g. the ESRC Survey Link Scheme (<http://qb.soc.surrey.ac.uk/sls.htm>) and, for engineers, the Royal Academy of Engineering's Industrial Secondment Scheme (<http://www.raeng.org.uk/research/univ/secondment/default.htm>).

6. *Furthermore, in the event of a merger, should the grant-giving functions of PPARC be moved to EPSRC?*

No comment

7. *The Government would welcome views on what further measures could be taken by the Research Councils to improve their effectiveness.*

Some members of the Academy call into question the effectiveness of major cross-Council research programmes (such as the current programme on the Rural Economy and Land Use, the Genomics initiative or the Technology-Enhanced Learning programme), where there is a perception that the Councils worry too much about spending ‘their share’ of the funds. We recommend that the best approach to managing such programmes should be the subject of an independent review.

Thank you for giving the Academy the opportunity to comment on these important issues.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Nigel Gilbert
(member of the Council of the Academy of Social Sciences)