Press release from the Academy of Social Sciences and Campaign for Social Science

19 November 2015

Response to Nurse Review

The Nurse review’s praise for the excellence of UK research must translate into continuing financial support for science when the Chancellor announces the government’s spending plans next week, say social scientists.

The Academy of Social Sciences together with its Campaign for Social Science welcome the report to the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills today from Sir Paul Nurse, president of the Royal Society – but his strong endorsement of the quality of research makes it even more urgent that the money is found.

The government should take especial note of Nurse’s warning against setting the level of public funding for science and technology at ‘sub-optimal’ level.

The Academy and Campaign have joined the Campaign for Science and Engineering, the British Academy and others in urging the government to sustain public investment in science, at least maintaining the real value of the science budget.

Professor Roger Goodman, chair of the Academy Council, called on social scientists to ‘seize the opportunity to lead and shape the cross-disciplinary research commended by Nurse. The review is welcome recognition that none of the challenges facing the UK can be addressed except by mobilising all the disciplines – with social science involved from start to finish.’

Social scientists should be at the forefront of exploiting the ‘common research fund’ proposed in the review, helping to frame the societal challenges and needs to which all the research councils will respond. The Economic and Social Research Council this year celebrates its 50th anniversary. In recent years, it has led several of the cross-disciplinary programmes launched by Research Councils UK – which demonstrates the appetite of social scientists to work with their colleagues, Professor Goodman noted.

But there are gaps in the new report. ‘Nurse leaves open important questions about the organisation of the research councils and support for research in universities, which we would like to see quickly resolved. It is unclear how funds will be allocated within Research UK (the new overarching body proposed by Nurse), creating ‘unwelcome uncertainty’ according to Professor James Wilsdon, chair of the Campaign for Social Science.'
'Nor is it clear how research funds will be distributed to universities under the dual support system – which Nurse has strongly supported. We will be underlining to the government the Nurse recommendation that administration of quality-related funds be kept strictly separate from research council grants, to preserve a mechanism that everyone agrees is responsible for the UK’s amazing performance.'

The Academy and Campaign, which will publish their full response to the Nurse proposals and the higher education green paper in the New Year, welcome proposals to enrich conversations between Whitehall departments and the devolved administrations and the research councils, including the proposed new ministerial committee (depending on how it is constituted). Social researchers and economists in both universities and in government have a common interest in addressing ‘what works’ questions to do with productivity, public services, ageing and social mobility.

Notes to Editors

1. The Academy of Social Sciences is the principal national academy for social sciences in the UK, representing 40 learned societies and 1,000 distinguished fellows.
2. The Campaign for Social Science earlier this year published The Business of People, setting out the strengths of UK social science.

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