

The Rt Hon John Denham MP

Secretary of State for Innovation,
Universities and Skills

Department for
**Innovation,
Universities &
Skills**

Professor Nigel Thrift
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11 June 2008

Dear Nigel

RESEARCH CAREERS

Following our discussion whilst visiting the US in April of this year, I'm grateful for your agreement to look into an area of strategic importance to the UK, and which I hope will form a key part of a wider debate I am keen to see take place across all aspects of Higher Education. I am pleased you have already begun to discuss this issue with officials here in DIUS, and I welcome your initial thoughts scoping out areas for potential investigation.

Research careers form a fundamental part of the supply and development of the next generation of world-class skills that will be needed for the country to maintain its leading position in the global economy. I am concerned there is a perception that doctoral, post-doctoral and the subsequent stages of typical research careers are not seen as all that attractive to some bright graduates. I would like to examine whether this is truly the case, understand why this situation exists, and identify what we can do to improve matters.

In particular I would like you to:

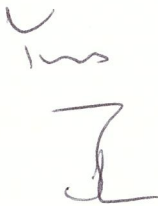
- Ascertain whether there is evidence that research careers are seen as relatively less attractive, when compared with the other options available at key decision points (e.g. graduation) as young people begin their careers, and what specific issues give rise to this effect.
- Consider whether existing incentives (whether stipends, salaries, access to grants or wider funding) exert sufficient positive influence on graduates, such that the supply of high quality researchers is maintained.
- Determine whether research careers are sufficiently flexible, allowing researchers to gain breadth and depth of experience and skills without penalising their wider activities – either in the context of the RAE/REF or the expectations of their host institutions.

- Provide me with recommendations which could improve both the quality and quantity of talented graduates choosing to enter long-term, sustainable, research careers.

The work of RCUK, following through the various lines that flow from the Roberts agenda, will have strong ties to your review, and I know they will await your findings with interest. In particular, as we launch the Research Careers Concordat later in June, there remain unanswered questions on the overall status of the sector on which your work will no doubt provide new insight. I therefore encourage you to work closely with those already engaged on this topic, and liaise with my officials on identifying key stakeholders who can assist in your work.

I would welcome your initial thoughts by mid-July, which I appreciate is a challenging timetable, when I suggest we meet to review progress and any emerging issues. I'd hope you can then deliver your considered views by September.

As you know, I have also asked a number of other individuals and organisations to review other important policy questions within the HE sector, and I am publishing all the relevant commissioning letters on the DIUS website.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John Denham', with a stylized flourish at the end.

JOHN DENHAM