



Council for Science and Technology

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Dear Dr Gibson

THE QUINQUENNIAL REVIEW OF THE GRANT AWARDING RESEARCH COUNCILS.

On behalf of the independent members of the Prime Minister's (Advisory) Council for Science and Technology, I am replying to your consultative letter of 30 October about this impending review.

We very much welcome the opportunity to provide you with our input at this preparatory stage. Seven years on from the 1993 S&T White Paper, we strongly favour a review that is both forward looking and radical.

Overall and a priori, we favour the status quo when it comes to the dual support arrangements by which the UK's science and engineering base within Universities is supported; and to the core tasks of the Councils within these arrangements, namely to support basic, strategic and applied research, and related post graduate research training.

Nonetheless, since much has changed since 1994 and so much is changing so fast, we believe that particular attention should be given to questions concerning the appropriate number of Research Councils and their missions, individual and collective. Because these questions are so integral to so many of the considerations listed in your letter, we believe that they would be best addressed in depth at stage 2.

Your letter indicates that stage 2 is likely to be conducted through a number of working groups. We consider that such groups would need to operate under some kind of overarching Review Board, chaired by the Director General of Research

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Councils and comprising representatives of the Councils and their principal stakeholders.

In our firm view, the nature and form of the outputs of stage 2 should be considered and settled fairly early on in the process. Some of these outputs will undoubtedly be in the form of recommendations about particular matters for immediate change or for further work/consideration. But, more generally, we believe that stage 2 must result in a clear vision about the desired position in say five years time, and what needs to be done to achieve it from the present situation.

We strongly favour a thematic approach for stage 2 with a clear distinction drawn between policy and operational issues. From this standpoint, it seems to us that one of these working groups would need to undertake a top level strategic, stock taking, SWOT type exercise that took account of the issues under the first heading of the attached list. As you will see, these are strategic in nature and mostly fall directly within the scope of Council's core tasks, as defined above.

The remainder however, especially those indicated at (a), (c), (f) and to some extent (d), relate to important areas in which the Councils are engaged to some extent at present and which we think merit particular consideration in their own right in strategic terms. For instance, in view of the Government's policies for science and innovation as the bedrock of the UK's economy and well being, we very much favour close examination of the Councils' responsibilities and effectiveness concerning applied research and technology transfer.

Similarly, with the societal, educational and communication aspects of science becoming increasingly important from all viewpoints, we see a strong case for considering closely the Councils' existing activities and organisation in these respects.

More generally, we see the need to address the question about their responsibilities when it comes to the vital task of systematically monitoring (and advising on) the health of the science and engineering base in an holistic, forward looking way, focussing on changes to its size, structure and quality and the key drivers involved, both current and prospective. Lines of responsibility and accountability for this are far from clear at present.

As for our views on other issues that less strategic than these,, we have listed them under five further headings, which might provide the basis for setting up the other working groups. They could of course be combined in accordance with the number of working groups that are eventually set up.

For instance, the operational issues concerning the Councils' executive and administrative functions and activities could be usefully brigaded into a remit for one working group. That group might also usefully address issues concerning the Councils'

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operational links with their customers, their other stakeholders including the other research funding bodies, and with their parent department OST/DTI.

In conclusion, I should perhaps explain that at its last meeting on 25 September 2000, the Council decided to provide its views and advice during stage 1 on the terms of reference for stage 2 of this review; to make a substantive response to the consultation exercise at this second stage; and to publish a report on this work once finished, possibly after its meeting on 5 March 2001.

With your deadline of 23 November in mind, I have agreed this letter and attachment so far with my CST colleagues Alec Broers, Kumar Bhattacharyya, Paul Nurse and David VandeLinde. They kindly agreed to join me in a sub-group for preparing the Council's views and advice

At the next CST meeting on 4 December, I shall be taking the opportunity to seek the views and comments of my other Council colleagues. Should they raise any further issues or points, I will ensure that you are informed immediately via CST's secretary, Steve Elton.

For the purposes of openness, we are intending to place this letter on the Council's web site shortly after the meeting

Yours sincerely

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