House of Commons

Science and Technology Committee

Office of Science and Technology: Scrutiny Report 2004: Government Response to the Committee's Third Report of Session 2004–05

Sixth Special Report of Session 2004–05

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The Science and Technology Committee

The Science and Technology Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Office of Science and Technology and its associated public bodies

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The current staff of the Committee are: Chris Shaw (Clerk); Emily Commander (Second Clerk); Alun Roberts (Committee Specialist); Hayaatun Sillem (Committee Specialist); Ana Ferreira (Committee Assistant); Robert Long (Senior Office Clerk); and Christine McGrane (Committee Secretary).

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Sixth Special Report

On 31 January 2005 the Science and Technology Committee published its Third Report of Session 2004–05, *Office of Science and Technology: Scrutiny Report 2005* as HC 8. On 14 March 2005 the Committee received a memorandum from the Government which contained a response to the Report. The memorandum is published without comment as an appendix to this Report.

Government Response

Introduction

The Government welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Committee's Scrutiny Report of the Office and Science and Technology for 2004, presented below under each of the report's conclusions/recommendations. We welcome the Committee's close, constructive and stimulating focus on a range of key issues throughout the year.

As stated by Patricia Hewitt, Secretary of State for Trade & Industry in announcing the research funding allocations on 7th March 2005,

> "Science and innovation are central to improving the environment in which we all live, the nation's health and ensuring the success of the UK economy. Government spending on UK science will be the largest ever investment by any Government in British science and will rise to over £3.4 billion a year by 2008. This is testament to our commitment to make the UK the best place in the world to do science. Our record investment in science sends a strong signal to scientists around the world that the UK is the place to come to carry out research in cutting edge areas including medical treatments such as stem cell research and nanotechnology."

With 1% of the world's population and 5% of the world's science funding, our scientists now receive 12% of the world's citations to their work, ranking second only to the USA and in front of Germany and Japan. However, there is increasing competition in the global economy, and the UK must build and capitalise on its significant strengths to stay ahead of the game.

To this end, we are delivering on the Ten Year Science & Innovation Investment Framework, announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in July 2004. This is the Government's largest commitment yet to global excellence in research and innovation. The Investment Framework targets making the UK world-class in basic science, translating knowledge more effectively into innovation and enabling the UK to be a leading place for R&D and high value-added business.

Responses to Recommendations

1. Performance indicators inevitably tell us as much about past decisions as they do about the current situation. We hope that the areas in which the UK's performance is now suffering due to previous underinvestment will remind the Government of the

importance of continuing to increase its investment in science, even when improvements are unlikely be seen in the short term. This is key to ensuring that the UK does not slip further against the performance of other countries in future years. (Paragraph 10)

2. The detailed indicators used by Evidence Ltd in 2003 and 2004 have been extremely useful in assessing the performance of UK science within an international context. It is not clear that the new high-level performance measures adopted by the Government in its Investment Framework will be either as clear or as useful. We recommend that DTI continues to use the Evidence Ltd indicators to ensure that it receives, and projects, an accurate message about the performance of its Science and Engineering Base. We further recommend that DTI does not change its indicators again without good reason in order to allow year-on-year comparison. (Paragraph 12)

The measures set out in the Ten Year Science & Innovation investment Framework underline the Government's long term commitment to increased investment in science and to maintaining the UK's high world class ranking in research.

The Committee's recognition of the clarity which the Evidence Ltd report, commissioned by OST, has brought to the assessment of UK performance is welcome. We shall continue to build on this work. The indicators set out in the Evidence Ltd reports feed into, and complement, the wider set of high-level performance measures which will be used in assessing progress against the Investment Framework.

3. We are surprised that the Government signed up to European targets which it does not believe that the UK has any "realistic" hope of achieving. If the UK wishes to be at the forefront of European research and development it should aspire to match the most successful of the European countries in meeting the most challenging of targets. It can only achieve this if the targets it signs up to are genuinely attainable. (Paragraph 22)

The European Union aspiration of moving towards investing 3% of GDP on R&D by 2010 recognises that Member States need to make their own individual choices on the way forward—it is a Community objective, not a target set for individual Member States. What is important is that the Member States now have a shared political commitment to increasing investment in R&D in Europe.

Raising R&D intensity to 2.5 % from the current level of 1.9% would put the UK in a strong position to compete internationally and to close the gap with the US. It is a challenging target for the UK, but one which is feasible given the UK's starting point and the strengths and structures of its science and industrial bases. The UK Government considered that it was important to make clear that increasing R&D is a responsibility of both government and the private sector, and to set out a clear target for both to work towards. The target set out in the Government's Ten year Science & Innovation Investment Framework was arrived at following consultation with business and has been supported by business subsequently as a helpful guiding ambition to focus public and private investments in future years.

4. It is not clear to us why the Government is able to set ambitious targets for increased private sector investment in R&D but balks at setting similarly challenging targets for

its own departments. If the UK is to succeed at meeting its target of investing 2.5% of GDP in R&D by 2014 the Government needs to lead by example. (Paragraph 26)

The Government's intention is that R&D spending by its own departments should be valued highly, planned by departments, costed, and incorporated into departmental strategies and spending plans along with other spending priorities. Departments themselves should have the responsibility for determining their own research budgets as they are best placed to know their own research needs and how these fit with other departmental priorities. Centrally-mandated R&D budgets would not be an effective way of ensuring that departments themselves have considered their research needs and factored these into their spending plans.

Action is being taken to ensure that departments have fully effective research and evidence strategies (including science) in place, and that best practice on planning and commissioning research is shared between departments. For example, the Office of Science & Technology is working with departments to evaluate their research and innovation strategies for quality and cost effectiveness. Raising the profile and effectiveness of R&D spend in this way will help underline the importance apportioned to this type of spending within departments, and feed through into R&D spending plans on a more sustainable basis than one-off centrally mandated budgets.

It should be noted that, whilst not setting targets for Other Government R&D, the indicative scenario set out in the Ten Year Science & Innovation Investment Framework does incorporate a neutral assumption that the sum total of departmental R&D spend rises in real terms at the trend rate of growth of the economy as a whole over the coming decade.

5. We recommend that the Government considers introducing sector-specific tax incentives in order to encourage the growth of R&D in those sectors that currently lag behind in this area. (Paragraph 27)

The structure of the R&D tax credit was designed following extensive consultation with business. This process informed the Government's decision to implement a simple 'volume-based' tax credit—based on a company's total R&D activity. The present structure therefore already provides companies, across all industry sectors, with a generous incentive to increase R&D spending, while leaving the decisions on individual projects in their own hands. Business has welcomed the tax credit and its success is reflected in the high level of Government support that has been provided through the scheme: over £700m of support for business R&D since the tax credit's introduction in 2000.

The R&D tax credit is only one of a package of measures to deliver increases in innovation in the UK. The Government believes that the present structure of the credit is the correct one to give businesses the proper platform to increase their R&D investment. Further sector-specific tax incentives could undermine the simplicity of the tax credit scheme and compromise the underlying principle that the market, not the Government, should determine which sectors will innovate and grow in the future.

6. It is a positive sign that the Government sought the views and expert opinions of the scientific community when compiling its Investment Framework. Nonetheless, we suspect that this may have been a token gesture. Insufficient time was given for

meaningful contributions to be made. It is also unclear how the submissions have helped to shape the policies outlined in the Framework. This must have been extremely disappointing for the many organisations that expended considerable resources on producing their responses within an unreasonably tight deadline. We hope that the departments involved will seek to reassure the scientific community that their contributions are valued by allowing a minimum of twelve weeks for future consultations, as recommended by the Cabinet Office. (Paragraph 30)

The consultation process was an invaluable part of the process of drawing up the Ten Year Science & Innovation Investment Framework. We were pleased to receive around 200 responses from a wide range of individuals and organisations, reflecting a range of views which helped to shape the final Investment Framework document. The Investment Framework itself built upon a substantial body of consultation over recent years which had been conducted as part of policy development across Government which was brought together in the Framework. These developments include the DTI Innovation Report and Lambert review of business-university collaboration in 2003, the ongoing work by the Office of Science & Technology on financial sustainability of university research funding, the work of the Research Funders' Forum, Sir Gareth Roberts' review of Research Assessment in 2003 and the newly re-constituted Council for Science & Technology.

Whilst the timing involved in producing the documents to align with the 2004 Spending Review inevitably provided for a short consultation period, many organisations had already expressed views through the extensive consultations referred to above, and the team working on the Framework was both keen and able to ensure that as many views as possible were taken on board. So, in addition to the official consultation exercise, the team also took part in a range of briefings and meetings with interested parties, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office canvassed views from posts on our behalf, and the Cambridge MIT Institute surveyed a selection of US organisations for their views. The full range of the consultations undertaken, including those listed above, are set out in Annex D of the Framework.

7. Given the substantial increases in the Science Budget, it is important that DTI retains sufficient staff capacity within OST to manage and administer the new funds. We intend to monitor this situation closely. (Paragraph 34)

The small planned cut of 4 staff in the Office of Science & Technology during next financial year reflects the fact that science and engineering, along with knowledge transfer and innovation, are DTI's key priorities, reinforced by the Ten Year Science & Innovation Investment Framework.

8. Whilst we appreciate that the distinction between basic and applied research is not always clear cut, particularly when basic research leads to unexpected applications, it is important that the Government is mindful of the danger that an increased emphasis on wealth creation could lead to a decrease in the volume of basic research that is funded. It is at the basic level that some of the most important scientific developments take place, and this research should not be neglected in the rush to generate concrete outputs. (Paragraph 39)

The Government agrees with the Committee on the importance of sustaining our high quality basic research in delivering a strong science base that leads to world-class excellence. It also believes that applied research, building on this excellence, is important in improving knowledge transfer which drives productivity and the economy, to the benefit of the wider community.

The Ten Year Science & Innovation Investment Framework sets out our strategy, with additional funding for both basic research (through HEFCE QR and the Research Councils) and the Higher Education Innovation Fund, to safeguard the science base and increase knowledge transfer activities. Activity to support knowledge transfer is provided through a separate "third leg" funding stream, so does not involve a transfer of resources from HEIs' budgets for research. Latest statistics provided through the Higher Education Business Interaction Survey indicate that the funding provided to support this activity is having a useful impact by helping HEIs to forge stronger links with business and with their local communities. We remain committed to targeting funding to the highest quality (as judged by the Research Assessment Exercise). The revised RAE 2008 emphasises equity in the assessment of all forms of research, so that applied research is not disadvantaged. There is no intention to decrease the quality or volume of basic research in favour of applied research or wealth creation.

9. We commend the Government for making funds available to support the indirect costs of research funded by the charitable sector. On the same principle, we recommend that the Government makes funds available to support the indirect costs of EU-funded research. This is vital to ensuring that the universities in the UK continue to take on research projects funded at a European level. (Paragraph 44)

A stream of funding to support EU-funded research would fall within the overall envelope of Government funding for research; i.e. it would be at the expense of QR (Quality-Related research funding). University Vice-Chancellors generally wish to retain as much discretion as possible with regard to how they spend their QR grant. The further increase of £80 million for sustainability, in addition to the £120 million announced in 2002, will enable Research Councils to pay a higher percentage of the Full Economic Costs than previously. This will also free up QR money, part of which might be used by the university in question to subsidise high quality EU projects, if they so wished, while still remaining sustainable overall. In addition, the increase in DfES funding for research announced in SR2004 will allow universities more opportunity to co-fund research projects of the best quality, from whichever source, while retaining their autonomy to choose which projects align most closely with their strategies. The Government is committed, as part of the Ten Year Science & Innovation Investment Framework, to arguing for the European Commission to pay public sector institutions a higher proportion of the full economic costs of the research it funds under the Framework Programme.

10. The additional funds allocated to the Research Councils for 2005–06 and 2007–08 are welcome. Given the opacity of the data supplied by Government on this issue, however, we are unable to judge whether or not the additional funds will be sufficient to enable the Research Councils to sustain the current volume of research supported when they move to paying 80% of the full economic cost. We urge the Government to ensure that Research Councils can maintain their current portfolio of research projects

even whilst moving towards paying the full economic cost of that research. (Paragraph 47)

Research Councils will not have to reduce the number of projects they fund—nor will they use the extra funding to increase volume. The 80% figure for the full economic costs paid for each project grant has been set to preserve the existing volume of research, taking into account both the extra £120M from 2005–06 and the further £80M from 2007–08.

11. We welcome the studies on workforce trends to be carried out by HEFCE and the Research Careers Committee and hope that the Government will respond rapidly to any findings that they produce. However, the Government needs to have a number of policy ideas at its fingertips should these studies identify a continuing problem with short-term research contracts in science and engineering. We are very concerned that an over-reliance on the benefits to be realised from the introduction of the EU Fixed Term Work Directive will hold back any new Government initiatives to address this problem. (Paragraph 49)

The Government is confident about the value of the Fixed Term Employees Regulations as the key measure for reducing the reliance of research employers on the use of short-term contracts. HEIs are autonomous organisations and decide their own recruitment and employment practices, but these regulations will limit their use of successive short-term contracts beyond four years of employment. We are conscious that many HEIs are already actively making positive changes to their employment processes in support of the new regulations.

The Research Careers Committee is considering how best to take the 1996 Concordat for the Employment of Contract Research Staff forward in light of progress since that time, but it is clear that any new initiative has to receive commitment from employers (as autonomous bodies) and funders alike. The UK has been at the heart of negotiations to develop a European Charter for Researchers, which outlines a framework of general principles for the roles, requirements and entitlements of good practice for employers, funders and researchers. Taken together these pieces of work will ensure that good practice benefits research employees.

The annual HEFCE report on workforce trends will include evidence and analysis on the use of short-term contracts in HE. While we cannot pre-empt the report's findings, we look forward to using these data, and the advice of the Research Careers Committee, to inform future Government policy in this area.

12. The Government is to be commended for the establishment of a new Resource Centre for Women in S&T. We look forward to receiving updates on its progress. (Paragraph 51)

Within the overall £4.1 million allocated for the Resource Centre for Women in SET, £1.5 million is ring fenced for a dedicated Returners Package. A highlight of this will be the Open University courses designed to help women regain important SET workplace skills, develop their CVs and have special access to scientific journals via the OU library. Mentoring and networking will also be major features of this package.

OST will report progress on the work of the Resource Centre for Women in SET to the Minister for Science and Technology which the Committee may wish to explore at the regular "Question Time" meetings he has with them.

13. We welcome HEFCE's tacit, if belated, acknowledgement that Government intervention may be necessary to secure adequate provision of university science teaching at a regional and national level. We hope that it will act swiftly to ensure that the problem does not get any worse. (Paragraph 53)

As well as providing significant support for university departments, the Government is also acting strategically to influence demand for science and technology subjects like those that have been the focus of recent publicity on closures. The Secretary of State for Education and Skills also wrote to the Funding Council (HEFCE) in December asking for advice. He asked them to consider whether any intervention is appropriate for a list of proposed strategic subjects—which include the whole Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics range. HEFCE has been asked to consider when further intervention might be right, and what types of action could be considered to strengthen and secure subjects of strategic national importance. HEFCE has set up an expert group to advise on this matter and will report to Ministers in June.

14. The Committee remains concerned about the strategic provision of science subjects in English universities. We announced an inquiry into this issue on 21 December 2004, and will be taking written and oral evidence early in 2005. (Paragraph 54)

The Government will of course respond fully to the Committee's report in due course.

15. The Science Review Directorate's study of DCMS has yielded some useful recommendations, particularly if they lead to the appointment of a Chief Scientific Adviser to the department. Nonetheless, we are concerned that the programme of reviews will lose momentum and influence if there are not marked improvements to the process. We are also keen that OST should focus on the departments with a high science content at an early stage in the review cycle. (Paragraph 58)

The Committee's endorsement of the DCMS report is welcome. OST will continue to liaise with DCMS and have been providing the department with advice on the appointment of a Chief Scientific Adviser. DCMS has now formally responded to the report and welcomed the recommendation that it should appoint a CSA.

With regard to future reviews, as the DCMS review neared completion, OST appointed RAND consultants to conduct an independent, external review, alongside an in-house appraisal of the best way forward. A number of lessons have been learned as a result and it has been decided to contract-out the main phase of future reviews, following an in-house scoping stage. This approach will allow the Office of Science & Technology team to have up to three reviews running at any one time, depending on the size of the departments involved. The next two departments to be reviewed: HSE and Defra, both have a 'high science content' to their work. The Committee's desire to maintain that focus as we negotiate with other departments on the order of subsequent reviews has been noted. However, it should be recognised that:

— other considerations also need to play a part in deciding the value added, and hence the ordering of reviews, for example whether a department has recently undergone other major external reviews (e.g. by the NAO) or has been significantly re-organised; and

— departments with a smaller science content to their work may, nevertheless, benefit a good deal from reviews on some work streams where science is, or should be, important.

16. It is too early to tell whether or not the establishment of Science and Industry Councils within RDAs will improve their performance on science, engineering and technology-related matters. We look forward to reviewing the situation in next year's Scrutiny Report, when the Councils will have been in operation for a year. (Paragraph 61)

It is recognised that there have been concerns expressed about the lack of scientific expertise within the RDAs. As a result as part of the SR2004 settlement, funding has been allocated to support secondments from the research base into the RDAs, to increase the latter's capacity to engage in activity to support science and innovation in their regions. DTI is also working closely with the RDAs on their tasking framework. The Committee's intention to review the Science and Industry Councils after their first year of operation is noted."

17. The new Technology Strategy is a step in the right direction, and the attendant rationalization of DTI's existing business support schemes is welcome, if overdue. In particular, we welcome the tacit acknowledgement that civil servants in Whitehall are not necessarily best placed to identify opportunities for investment in innovation. (Paragraph 64)

With the rationalisation of DTI support programmes, the Technology Strategy is being implemented through two main mechanisms or products: Collaborative Research and Development, and Knowledge Transfer Networks. In 2004 two competitions were run, with attendant national and regional information days, and both competitions attracted a large number of good quality applications.

The Technology Strategy Board, under the Chairmanship of Graham Spittle (IBM), met for the first time on 1 November and again on 8 February. The Board has focussed on the processes and criteria for identifying technologies and projects, and its recent meeting determined the technologies to be supported in the competition to be launched in the Spring. It is expected to publish its first annual report later in the year.

18. The Government should not avoid taking difficult strategic decisions in order to avoid criticism. It should lead the debate and make the public aware of the long-term energy situation as well as the options for dealing with it. (Paragraph 68)

Sir David King and Government Ministers, including the Prime Minister, have spoken regularly, to a wide range of domestic and international audiences, about the challenge of climate change and the implications for future energy policy. There has been no avoiding of the key strategic issues and a key feature of the Government's approach has been public

engagement. Indeed, the UK Government's leadership on the issue, for example by making it a key theme for the UK's G8 Presidency, has been internationally acknowledged.

In addition, an extensive consultation with stakeholders is currently underway as part of a review of the UK's Climate Change Programme. The review will include the appraisal of a large number of measures, both potential new ones and enhancements of current policies, that could add further impetus to UK progress on emissions.

The Government has made clear that energy efficiency and renewables are the priority in terms of reducing emissions, in the context that the performance of all energy policies are kept under review against the goals set out in the 2003 Energy White Paper. The option of new nuclear build is retained in case it is needed to meet UK greenhouse gas emissions goals. It remains the case however that there are issues regarding the attractiveness of the economics of new nuclear build and the long-term disposal of waste to be resolved. The Government has established the Committee on Radioactive Waste Management (CORWM) to address the waste issue, and the Committee is due to report to Ministers with recommendations by July 2006.

A range of technology solutions will be required to achieve the low carbon energy economy needed to mitigate climate change. To this end, the Government is supporting an extensive portfolio of research and innovation activities, including via specific strategies to assist the development of hydrogen and carbon abatement technologies, and through participation in the International Tokamak Experimental Reactor (fusion) project.

19. **We would welcome reassurance that the Government is still wholeheartedly convinced of the need to press the case for ITER to be located on a single site, preferably in Europe. (Paragraph 70)**

20. The location of ITER needs to be resolved as a matter of urgency in order to avoid any further delays to the commencement of this very important project. We hope that the Government will push for a resolution to discussions by the end of March 2005, the possible timescale identified by Lord Sainsbury. (Paragraph 71)

The Government remains a strong supporter of a fast track broad approach to fusion and to locating ITER in Cadarache, France. The EU's Competitiveness Council has given the European Commission a mandate to negotiate a 6 party ITER (EU, China, Japan, Russia, South Korea, US) located in Cadarache. The Council has also given the Commission a mandate to negotiate locating ITER in Cadarache with fewer partners if necessary. Under the Broad Approach, ITER would be located in Cadarache with other fusion facilities (eg satellite tokamaks, International Fusion Materials Irradiation Facility—IFMIF) located elsewhere in support of the fast track. This might include an upgrade to the Japanese Fusion facility, JT60.

The Government very much hopes that all 6 parties will support the construction of ITER in Cadarache and supports the Commission's efforts in negotiations to achieve this. However, the Government also recognises that these negotiations cannot be prolonged indefinitely and that decisions will need to be taken soon. The Government has made this point in the Competitiveness Council and the Commission is actively pursuing an early decision.

21. Whilst we welcome any attempt by OST to ensure that its science and society programmes function effectively, we are not convinced that outsourcing this work is the answer. If the public is to be confident about the "governance, regulation and use of S&T", the Government needs to be actively involved in public engagement and dialogue. (Paragraph 73)

The Office of Science & Technology remains firmly committed to improving society's confidence about the governance, regulation and use of S&T. As set out in the Ten Year Science and Innovation Investment Framework there is a clear commitment to increasing investment in this area significantly. The main programmes are on developing effective public engagement (through Sciencewise), enthusing young people about science (through SETNET and the science and engineering ambassadors scheme) and promoting the role of women in the science workforce and in the governance of science (through the Women's Resource Centre). OST will continue to develop practical S&S policies and to pursue efficient delivery by effective oversight of the work of the delivery agents who receive OST funding for S&S programmes.

22. We welcome the introduction in Parliament of the Serious Organised Crime and Police Bill. We hope, however, that the Government will include measures to guard against economic sabotage in its raft of measures to tackle crime against people and organisations, and their suppliers and contractors, that legitimately conduct research using animals. (Paragraph 76)

The Government introduced amendments at report stage of the Serious Organised Crime and Police Bill which are intended to tackle crime against people connected to animal research organisations. Two new offences are proposed. The first makes it an offence to use criminal actions, or tortious acts which cause loss or damage, to interfere in contracts or other commercial arrangements with the intention of harming an animal research organisation. The second makes it an offence to threaten someone with an unlawful act because they are connected to an animal research organisation, whether as a supplier, customer or other associate, even at several removes.

March 2005

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