



Research Council peer review in the wider science base

Response to RCUK's consultation on the efficiency and effectiveness of peer review

1. Campaign for Science & Engineering is pleased to submit this response to RCUK's consultation on peer review. CaSE is a voluntary organisation campaigning for the health of science and technology throughout UK society, and is supported by over 1,500 individual members, and some 70 institutional members, including universities, learned societies, venture capitalists, financiers, industrial companies and publishers. The views of the membership are represented by an elected Executive Committee.
2. It is not appropriate for CaSE to answer the specific questions about the workings of different models, and we have confined ourselves to the general matter of the merits of some of the proposed methods of altering peer review.
3. We are disappointed that the report and consultation do not address the issue of *why* it has become necessary to tackle the costs of peer review. It is all very well noting that the number of grant applications has doubled since the late 1980s, but if the whole research system had just doubled in size, this would be nothing more than was expected. In fact, the Research Councils have grown more rapidly than other parts of the system, and simultaneously, the working of the Research Assessment Exercise has meant that an every greater proportion of other funds (from the Funding Councils) stack up on top of Research Council grants. This means that competition for Research Council funding has become proportionally more intense. Changing the operation of grant distribution may or may not be an appropriate way of dealing with this, but it has the appearance of Ptolemaic epicycles, introduced to make the model appear to work perfectly without addressing the underlying basis of why it does not.

Consolidation

4. The description of consolidated funding sounds exactly like what the Funding Councils are supposed to provide – longer term stable funding for high performing groups with strong track records. The only difference is that RCUK's consolidated funding proposal allows the possibility of the money being distributed to 'research groups, departments or institutions,' while Funding Council block grants are given to institutions, but are based on assessments of arbitrarily-defined units that in practice mostly map onto departments.

5. Nobody could doubt that such stability and investment in proven success is a good thing, but if responsibility for it is to be transferred from the Funding Councils to the Research Councils, then we need a wider debate than this consultation. If RCUK has identified a failure of Funding Council system, that needs to be adequately

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addressed, and cannot be solved by putting a significantly larger proportion of Research Council funding into plugging the gap.

6. Previous investigations have already identified problems with the Research Councils committing so much of their funding to large, longer-term projects that there is insufficient left to invest in genuinely new ideas from individuals whose work does not fit into the existing priorities of the establishment. For example, the House of Commons Science & Technology Committee found that the MRC had not “achieved a sensible balance of long-term and shorter-term research funding”¹.

7. CaSE believes that RCUK has indeed recognised a genuine problem. The balance between Funding Council block grants and other sources of income (notably Research Council grants) has changed dramatically in recent years. In 1983, for every £1 invested in the science base by what is now the Office of Science & Innovation, the universities got £1.28 from the forerunners of the Funding Councils for a variety of purposes including long-term support of excellent groups². Now they get 86p³. This shift appears to have been largely deliberate, but has led to the virtual elimination of the kind of ‘long-term and flexible support for leading research’ described in the consultation. The UK science base should certainly restore that support, but it is not obvious without a larger debate whether tinkering with the peer review process is the best way to achieve it.

Greater use of outlines

8. Since many grant applications are turned down on the grounds that the ideas within them seem of less scientific importance than the competition, greater use of outlines is manifestly a good idea, if it can be made to work by sifting out these proposals accurately at an early stage.

9. The greater use of outlines is not incompatible with some of the other suggestions, and should be adopted irrespective of other changes that may or may not be made.

Assessing potential economic impact

10. This suggestion is wholly inappropriate. The only way to avoid ‘compromising research quality’ is to make judgements on the basis of research quality, not some arbitrary prediction about the potential economic usefulness of research. The most useful science comes from the strongest science base, and if we introduce the concept of ‘experts of identifying work of potential economic importance’ and give these people power to direct funding, we will only reduce the quality of our science base, while not succeeding in reaping the greater economic rewards that everyone wants to see.

11. Nobody doubts that there is always more that could be done to enhance the effectiveness with which British science is turned into economic and social advantage. But the keys to achieving that are (i) building strong links between academia and other sectors and (ii) effective mechanisms for a variety of routes to commercialisation of results. The key is definitely not to found in abusing the research base by directing precious funding away from the scientifically-best proposals and into research that someone has predicted, with an inevitable low success rate, to be of financial value.

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¹ *The Work of the Medical Research Council*, 3rd Report of the House of Commons Science & Technology Committee, Session 2002-2003 [HC132].

² *1986 Annual Review of Government Funding R&D*, Cabinet Office.

³ <http://www.dti.gov.uk/files/file22026.xls>