

Institute of Physics and Royal Society of Chemistry briefing on the Higher Education and Research Bill – House of Lords Committee Stage

1. The Institute of Physics (IOP) and the Royal Society of Chemistry (RSC) look forward to working with peers as the Bill passes through the House of Lords. Below, we highlight four areas where changes could be made which we consider would strengthen the Bill and result in a more positive impact on research and higher education. These areas are:
 - Fundamental, strategic and applied research
 - Safeguards on the remits and activities of research councils
 - Effective coordination between the OfS and UKRI
 - Support for strategically important and vulnerable subjects
2. Both the IOP and RSC have been heavily engaged with both the process leading up to the Higher Education and Research Bill and during its progress through Parliament, submitting evidence to the Nurse Review of Research Councils, to consultations on the Teaching Excellence Framework, to the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee inquiry into priorities for the interim chair of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), and to the House of Commons Public Bill Committee. We have engaged with relevant Government departments on aspects of the Bill and briefed MPs on the Bill during prior stages in the House of Commons.

FUNDAMENTAL, STRATEGIC AND APPLIED RESEARCH

3. Fundamental or basic research, as well as strategic and applied research, is vital for an effective research system. All play important and complementary roles in the development of new ideas and technologies, driving economic growth across the UK in both the short and long term. Fundamental research often lays the groundwork for future breakthroughs and applications. Funding across this research spectrum should be a core function of UKRI.
4. Recognition of the importance of this range of types of research is already embedded in the research councils' existing Royal Charters. For example, EPSRC is established and incorporated "to promote and support, by any means, high-quality basic, strategic and applied research..."¹
5. **We recommend that within existing clauses 87 and 89 the Bill make explicit reference to the role of UKRI in maintaining the UK's world-class capability across the spectrum from fundamental research through to technologies closer to market or deployment. We recommend that clause 89 should recognise that the contributions of research to economic growth and to improvements to quality of life in the UK can be long-term.**

SAFEGUARDS ON THE REMITS AND ACTIVITIES OF RESEARCH COUNCILS

6. Currently, the Bill allows the Secretary of State, by regulations, to add, omit, or change the name of a council (Page 55, Clause 86) and change its field of activity (Page 57, Clause 89).
7. These powers are held by the Secretary of State under existing legislation (the 1965 Act). However, removing or changing the remit of the Councils should not be an easy process; doing so could be disruptive and should only be undertaken with care, and following consultation. It is essential that the removal of Royal Charters does not result in frequent changes to the scope of the councils to the detriment of the suitability, expertise and accessibility of the council structure.

¹ <https://www.epsrc.ac.uk/about/history/royalcharter2003/>

- 8. We recommend that before enacting changes under clause 86 or 89, in addition to current regulations, the Secretary of State should be required to take into consideration the views of the research community and UKRI.**

EFFECTIVE COORDINATION BETWEEN THE OFS AND UKRI

9. Strong connections between research and teaching are vitally important. Each informs the other in the lab and the classroom; while administratively they are often intertwined. Responsibility for research and teaching is now split between the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Department for Education. This split is now mirrored in the creation of the split responsibilities of UK Research and Innovation and the Office for Students (OfS) respectively. There is a risk that the separation of teaching and research in the new HE architecture will mean that the benefits of research informing teaching and learning practices could be lost.
10. While in government this is currently aided by the joint departmental responsibilities of Jo Johnson as Minister of State for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation, there are weaker connections between the OfS and UKRI. While the Bill (Page 64, Clause 106) states that “The OfS and UKRI may cooperate with one another in exercising any of their functions” and that information is shared between the two of them for the purposes of the exercise of any of their functions, it is unclear how this will work in practice.
- 11. We recommend that, under Schedule 1 and Schedule 9, there should be a requirement for joint working, for example for cross-representation on the OfS and UKRI boards, or a joint committee including representatives of both UKRI and the OfS.**

SUPPORT FOR STRATEGICALLY IMPORTANT AND VULNERABLE SUBJECTS

12. Chemistry and physics are strategically important subjects; higher education chemistry and physics departments make an essential contribution to our economy and wider society. They deliver world-class education and training, and maintain strong links to local, national and international businesses.
13. The cost of providing degrees in chemistry and physics is high because of the high level technical skills students gain through hands-on laboratory experience. Research by the IOP and RSC shows that, in departments in English universities, the cost of teaching chemistry or physics is around £10,500 per student.² HEFCE currently provides additional (capped) funding to support the teaching of strategically important and vulnerable subjects (SIVS), under which both chemistry and physics departments receive funding.
14. The Bill makes efforts to open up further competition in the HE sector. In addition, the Government has made clear in an amendment that “Guidance framed by reference to a particular course of study must not guide the OfS to perform a function in a way which prohibits or requires the provision of a particular course of study.” (Page 2, Clause 2(5)).
- 15. We recommend the Bill either allow for the allocation of targeted funding for strategically important and vulnerable courses, or provides a mechanism by which the Secretary of State can provide financial support to designated institutions which may be under threat of closure or of terminating provision of degrees in strategically important subjects either nationally or regionally thereby unduly limiting opportunity or choice.**

² http://www.iop.org/publications/iop/2015/file_66515.pdf

Contact -

Daniel Lee, Policy Officer, Institute of Physics
daniel.lee@iop.org and 0207 470 4826

Dr Isolde Radford, Higher Education Programme Manager, Royal Society of Chemistry
radfordi@rsc.org and (01223) 432350