

Review of EPSRC's Strategic Advisory Routes

Call for written evidence

Completed by: **Tajinder Panesor, the Institute of Physics**

Question 1: Are the advisory processes that underpin EPSRC's strategic decisions transparent and clearly conveyed? *(please indicate below as appropriate)*

Yes	Partly	No	Cannot comment
	X		

Please provide comments to support your answer: *(maximum 150 words)*

The composition of EPSRC's strategic advisory bodies (i.e. the Strategic Advisory Network and the Strategic Advisory Teams) is well publicised on the EPSRC website and the agendas and minutes of the SAT meetings are readily available, which is appreciated by the EPS community as a positive step towards transparency. The selection process is also explained in some detail, but overall the criteria used in selecting individuals are obscure and lack transparency; this approach carries the risk of giving the impression that individuals are hand-picked by EPSRC.

Question 2: Are these advisory processes credible? *(please indicate below as appropriate)*

Yes	Partly	No	Cannot comment
	X		

Please provide comments to support your answer: *(maximum 150 words)*

There is a lack of transparency regarding how the results of the advisory processes are taken into account by EPSRC when formulating strategic priorities and how the recommendations made in the course of the advisory processes are implemented. Various policy changes have been introduced of late (e.g. loss of support for project studentships on research grants, etc.) and there is concern amongst the EPS community regarding the level of influence the SATs, in particular, have had on such decisions.

Credibility could be significantly enhanced by increasing the representation of international experts on EPSRC's advisory bodies. At present, it appears that EPSRC seeks advice from a rather narrow pool of UK-based individuals, reinforcing the perception that EPSRC is inward looking and supports perceived areas of strength at a national level. Another consequence of the restricted pool of advice is the poor horizon-scanning capability of the current system.

Question 3: Are there any particular gaps in the areas on which strategic advice is being sought? (please indicate below as appropriate)

Yes	Partly	No	Cannot comment
	X		

Please provide comments to support your answer: (maximum 150 words)

In some cases, such as the Grand Challenges topics, a great deal of strategic advice is obtained, whilst in others, such as PhD funding/CDTs, there is the perception that very little advice is sought from the EPS community.

Whilst each theme has its own strategic advisory team, it is unclear how interdisciplinary aspects which fall between different themes are dealt with. For instance, the Physical Sciences SAT covers physics, chemistry and materials, so can manage quite a lot of interdisciplinary issues; however, there are gaps, for example, between the interfaces with the biosciences and engineering, which need to be considered. Thus, in addition to international members, advisory bodies should also have a cross-disciplinary membership (i.e. broader than just EPS), to help generate a more imaginative and longer-term view to underpin EPSRC's research and capability portfolio.

Question 4: EPSRC's advisory routes currently provide advice directly to EPSRC's Executive and Theme Leads. Do you feel that this arrangement could be strengthened? (please indicate how in the comments)

Yes	Partly	No	Cannot comment
	X		

Please provide comments to support your answer: (maximum 150 words)

The EPS community needs reassurance that EPSRC is following the results of its advisory processes. There should be clear statements by the Executive and Theme Leads which convey how the results of these processes are implemented in strategic decision making. The processes should be open to scrutiny. The arrangement would also benefit from being more bottom-up, where the community interacts more frequently with Theme Leads. This increases the credibility of information submitted, ensuring balance. Perhaps it is worth considering a return to the standing committees with a rotating membership to help facilitate two-way communication. In addition, Theme Leads could benefit from the secondment of active scientists from academe or industry for a brief period to assist in the formulation of research priorities.

Regarding a different arrangement, there is the choice of a NSF-like EPSRC that is pro-active in shaping research and capabilities supported by better advice (especially international), or, conversely, an ERC-like EPSRC that only makes top-level decisions and allows the peer-review process to do the rest. An open consultation could be considered to help advise on the optimal model.

Question 5: Are the advisory processes sufficiently inclusive of the EPSRC stakeholder base? (please indicate below as appropriate)

Yes	Partly	No	Cannot comment

	X		
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Please provide comments to support your answer: *(maximum 150 words)*

EPSRC often solicits input from its stakeholder base and we are encouraged by the development and use of web-based communication tools. However, it is unclear how this input is used. An apparent limitation of this approach is that large and well-organised subject areas can be over-represented in the responses that EPSRC receives. It is not clear how EPSRC deals with this problem.

There is also lack of clarity surrounding what EPSRC defines as the ‘EPS community’. Is this current or past EPSRC grant-holders, or the wider class of researchers working within EPSRC’s remit?

The best advice would be truly independent, provided by a mix of representatives from the EPS community (chosen through a transparent process) and outstanding independent international experts. EPSRC should be free to follow the advice or not, but in either case the advice should be publicly available together with the rationale of the Executive underpinning its decision making.

Question 6: Should there be more open consultation? *(please indicate below as appropriate)*

Yes	Partly	No	Cannot comment
X			

Please provide comments to support your answer: *(maximum 150 words)*

It is essential that sufficient open consultation takes place before changes are made and strategic priorities are altered. Providing more open consultation will strengthen the current arrangement of providing advice directly to the Executive and Theme Leads. EPSRC must try to find ways of effectively engaging with the EPS community, and not just the Framework and Strategic Partner universities that it has identified.

Question 7: Are the processes and criteria for appointing EPSRC advisers clearly articulated and sufficiently transparent? *(please indicate below as appropriate)*

Yes	Partly	No	Cannot comment
	X		

Please provide comments to support your answer: *(maximum 150 words)*

As already mentioned, the overall criteria used in the selection process for the SATs are obscure and lack transparency. SAT members need to be chosen in an open process by the EPS community, and not hand-picked by EPSRC, which is the overwhelming perception.

In addition, the ‘invitation of key stakeholders’ to nominate members of the Strategic Advisory Networks leaves it open to what extent the community as a whole is able to influence the nomination process.

Question 8: Are you aware of the constraints that EPSRC is operating under? *(please indicate below as appropriate)*

Yes	Partly	No	Cannot comment
	X		

Please provide comments to support your answer: *(maximum 150 words)*

Some of the constraints, particularly those of a financial nature, are obvious, such as a lack of end of year flexibility and commitments to initiatives such as the CDTs, etc. Others, especially the need to be seen to contribute to short-term solutions of economic and societal problems, are clearly stated and to a certain degree are appreciated and understood by the EPS community. However, there is the perception that EPSRC reacts too quickly to government direction in order to align its funding and strategies with government policy, which results in strategic decisions being made in the absence of effective consultation with the community.

In addition, other constraints, specifically those surrounding the timing and packaging of large funding initiatives (generally capital), also appear to be related to political considerations rather than being science-driven; this can be a hindrance to allocating capital funds to where they are most needed (e.g. upgrades to existing national facilities) and makes it difficult to plan for the long term for both EPSRC and the community.

Question 9: What changes, if any, do you think could be made to the strategic advisory processes which would help to allay the concerns expressed within parts of the stakeholder community about some aspects of EPSRC's strategic decisions making? *(maximum 150 words)*

To summarise, we would like to see a strong, independent advisory process with a significant international and national component that is clearly representative of the EPS community and is chosen in a transparent way. It is important that if strategic decisions are to be made by EPSRC the community needs to understand both the necessity for such decisions, and how decisions are reached, which should be open to scrutiny.

Please use the space below to provide any supplementary comments about aspects of this review not covered above:

No comment.