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Mr James Dornan MSP
Convener
Scottish Parliament Education and Skills Committee
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

10 November 2016

Dear Mr Dornan,

Higher Education and Research Bill – further comments

I look forward to appearing before the Committee, on behalf of the RSE, at its evidence session on the Higher Education and Research Bill on 16 November.

On the understanding that the session will focus primarily on the research aspects of the Bill, the RSE sets out below some detailed comments on relevant issues. These comments build on an earlier letter provided to the Committee¹.

As previously stated, the RSE is broadly content with the provisions to which the Legislative Consent Memorandum relates. It supports the option for Scottish universities to take part in the Teaching Excellence Framework but with two caveats: that the TEF must not replace the current Scottish system of collaborative quality enhancement; and that it must be designed from the outset to take account of the strengths of the Scottish system. The RSE welcomes the provision for joint working between the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) and the Office for Students (OfS).

However, we continue to raise concerns about the fundamental re-design of research architecture in the UK and the impact of proposals on both the Scottish and wider UK research communities. UK research is highly successful by any measure, generating significant reputational and economic returns as well as contributing to advances in addressing many of the key challenges the world faces today. It is vital that reforms of the current system, whether through this Bill or following the EU referendum, are carefully designed to ensure that the sector is able to maintain, and enhance, its standing.

UKRI has the potential to improve the facilitation and support of interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research in the UK. It will be well-placed to identify and proactively address opportunities for collaboration. And it will have the capacity to act as a strong voice for the research community within governmental circles. But UKRI can only achieve these aims if it truly represents research communities across all parts of the UK, and, through the Research Councils, across all disciplines.

¹ Letter dated 17 October 2016

http://www.parliament.scot/S5_Education/Inquiries/RSE_HE_Research_Oct_2016.pdf



Scotland and the new UK research architecture

As recognised by Greg Clark, then Minister for Universities, Science and Cities, now Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, *"Scottish science and innovation makes a vital contribution to the UK's world class research base, bringing benefits for business and society as a whole"*².

Scotland is recognised internationally as an excellent place to do research in its own right. It is home to one of Europe's largest life science clusters and a recognised leader in a range of areas, from data science to renewable energies. It attracts a disproportionately large sum of competitively-awarded quality-based research funding from UK and EU sources, e.g. winning some 14% of Research Council project funding in 2014/15³. It is an integral part of the UK research community, with Scotland's universities collaborating with partners from across the UK on world-leading research, for example through Innovate UK's network of catapult centres for innovation.

The need, therefore, to ensure that research architecture in the UK is able to bring together and balance the interests of Scotland with those of England, Wales and Northern Ireland, is vital to the future health of the sector as a whole.

The Higher Education and Research Bill establishes UKRI as the central body that will be responsible for the distribution of almost all publicly-funded research in the UK. A statutory duty to execute its functions on behalf of all four nations would reassure research communities across the UK. However, this must be accompanied by mechanisms that would facilitate formal engagement between central and devolved levels, ensuring that devolved research policies and priorities are fed into decision-making processes. In addition, the active involvement of people with experience of and expertise in the devolved research communities within UKRI and the Research Councils will strengthen UKRI's ability to fully represent the sector.

Explicit recognition of UKRI's country-wide role and responsibilities is particularly crucial in light of the inclusion of Research England within the body. The RSE shares the concerns of Universities Scotland and others that this structure may significantly, if unintentionally, skew the focus of UKRI towards England, to the detriment of the devolved nations. There may be a natural inclination for UKRI to work more closely with the institutions with which it is most familiar through Research England. A proactive approach to guarding against such unconscious bias, in particular through strong mechanisms for engagement with SFC, will be necessary.

The dual support mechanism

An additional concern that arises from the inclusion of Research England under the UKRI banner is that the move draws together two previously distinct strands of public funding for research within one body. The Committee will be well aware that the dual support mechanism is one of the key features of the UK's highly successful research system, combining stable core funding with competitive project-based grants.

As it currently stands, the Higher Education and Research Bill raises potential for flows between the financial allocations to the constituent bodies of UKRI (the Research Councils, Research England and Innovate UK, although it has been stated elsewhere that the latter will maintain a separate budget). Clearly there is potential for negative impact on Scotland if funds for which it can currently compete through the Research Councils are moved to Research England, from which Scotland's institutions will be excluded.

² Greg Clark MP speech to RSE Fellows, 24 July 2014, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/scotlands-science-and-research-community-is-a-successful-and-valued-part-of-the-uk>

³ Universities Scotland, September 2016, <http://www.universities-scotland.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/US-briefing-for-Committee-stage-FINAL-1-Sep-16.pdf>

However, there are also UK-wide concerns about the protection of an appropriately balanced dual support mechanism in the future, and on the potential consequences for all of the constituent bodies should any single body experience budgetary difficulties. For these reasons, we suggest that a statutory separation of the funding streams for the Research Councils, Research England and Innovate UK would be prudent.

Role of the Research Councils

The RSE has previously welcomed the retention of the seven Research Councils. The Research Councils are another crucial component of the current, highly successful, UK research system. They are well respected within their communities and each has developed its own model of active engagement with researchers.

We urge policy-makers and those involved in the establishment of UKRI to ensure that the role of the Research Councils is not downgraded. It is important that real engagement with the research community is maintained, and that the new system does not impose a highly top-down approach.

We note that the UK Government, in its publication of a vision for UKRI⁴, set out an intention to create an Executive Committee that would bring together the Executive Chairs of the Research Councils with the Chief Executive, Chief Financial Officer and other senior directors of UKRI. A statutory commitment to the creation of such a Committee, and its role in engaging with the UKRI Board, would be a practical step.

Innovate UK

The RSE continues to express reservations about the inclusion of Innovate UK under the auspices of UKRI. While we welcome moves to create greater synergy and collaboration between the research and business communities, Innovate UK has a quite distinct mission and target market than the other bodies of UKRI. It cannot be assumed that the inclusion of Innovate UK within UKRI will enhance its relationship with the research bodies; a thoroughly considered strategy will be required to ensure that the hoped-for synergies are achieved. Further, Innovate UK will need to take active steps to maintain a position distinct from the academic research community, in the eyes of its business stakeholders.

Moving forward

The RSE was disappointed that amendments put forward to address some of the foregoing issues were rejected by the Public Bill Committee in Westminster, as it scrutinised the Higher Education and Research Bill. However, we will continue to monitor progress of the Bill as it passes to the House of Lords and press for the concerns we and others in Scotland have raised to be resolved.

In addition, we will continue to engage with the establishment of UKRI. We understand, from a recent meeting with the interim Chair, Sir John Kingman, that vacancies on the Board will be advertised shortly and will bring these to the attention of our Fellows.

Yours sincerely

Professor Lesley Yellowlees CBE FRSE

⁴ Department for Education and Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, October 2016, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/559210/Higher_Education_and_Research_Bill-UKRI_Vision_Factsheet.pdf