



NWUA Response to ‘Science and innovation investment framework 2004-2014: next steps’

This response has been prepared on behalf of the North West Universities Association, which consists of fifteen member institutions. Many members will be submitting individual institutional responses which will reflect their individual contexts. This response brings together regional issues which have collective consensus.

1. The Government would be interested in views about whether the existing framework for supporting science and innovation enables an appropriate level of risk-taking, and if not, suggestions of how any gap might be addressed.

NWUA believes that there remains a significant gap between research and product development in the area of ‘proof of concept’ and would welcome the availability of more resources to stimulate a greater appetite for risk in relation to commercialisation of research.

On a second point, the RAE currently is primarily an instrument to sustain and reward research excellence, whilst HEIF funding supports knowledge transfer. Drivers for developing and applying new research areas in line with regional and/or national economic needs are limited. Support to reduce the risk associated with capacity development in such ‘emerging areas’ might be a consideration (see also the response to question 2).

2. The Government invites views on measures to remove any remaining bias which unfairly favours established research fields over innovative ones. The Government also invites views on how funding mechanisms can be made more responsive to new research challenges.

The NWUA Research Strategy Group has advocated the view that many innovative research fields, particularly those at the boundaries between disciplines can lead to considerable success. The NWUA would welcome measures to improve the assessment of the quality of interdisciplinary activity, without compromising the world-class reputation of established research fields. In addition, it is also important to encourage the cross fertilisation of ideas between disciplines, in certain cases this is more appropriate at a national or indeed international level but there may be a number of ways in which regional collaborations could enhance this aim. For example within the North West there is currently high level, multidisciplinary and complementary expertise across a number of HEIs in Materials Science.

The HE sector in the North West in the past has proposed the development of a broader interface between industry and academia through the formation of ‘academic

clusters'. These clusters might include a broad range of academic expertise to permit more effective communication with industrial clusters, would build up critical mass and open up new areas of research, particularly those at the boundary of traditional disciplines. The model promotes multi-disciplinary collaboration, especially with disciplines outside science and technology such as management, and the creative industries. This model both supports existing clusters as well as catalyses the emerging business clusters of the future. Successful examples in the North West include the Joule Centre, Dalton Nuclear Institute and the Cockcroft Institute, all of which bring together academic experts from relevant disciplines to create world-class centres of research.

It may be an appropriate role for the Science & Industry Councils in the regions to work with key partners to identify where experience may exist but is currently fragmented across the region (i.e. spread across several HEIs in terms of critical mass or infrastructure provision) rather than residing within a single department of a HEI. To take advantage of this, there is a need for a framework within which collective strengths can be recognised and enhanced.

3. The Government would welcome views on the barriers limiting greater business innovation and business-university collaboration in the regions, and on what more could be done on a national and regional level to tackle these barriers effectively.

Improving the co-ordination between national and regional schemes to ensure there is a clear interface for engaging businesses is vital, however in the development of the network of national and regional innovation advisors and the establishment of regional 'innovation hubs' it will be essential to fully involve the expertise of HEIs.

In the North West there has been a successful partnership between the RDA and HEIs, which culminated in the match-funding of HEIF, with £12 million allocated during round 2. However, there is not a similar general regional contribution to HEI activity funded through HEIF3. NWUA would advocate continuation of such combined support to HEIs from regional sources to enable HEIs to meet the demands of regional businesses.

4. The Government would welcome views – in particular from outside Higher Education – which can be taken into account in developing best practice models for business-university collaboration. In addition, the Government would welcome views on how to encourage businesses to work with universities for the first time, perhaps by introducing short-term, low-cost mechanisms for business-university interaction.

The NWUA welcomes the change in funding model for HEIF to create a more stable platform for knowledge transfer activities within institutions.

Experience has shown that it is costly for HEIs to engage in these interactions and indeed if we are to increase the number of businesses routinely interacting with universities, support is required. NWUA members would welcome the introduction of measures to support these interactions. For example, the need for intermediary

organisations to undertake pre-analysis and diagnosis of SMEs problems demonstrates the need for continuing funds like HEIF to support this work in HEIs.

The KnowledgeNorthWest project has shown that the most successful ways of interaction have been those involving detailed engagement with intermediary organisations, such as through the networks of lead academics for the regional economic strategy priority sectors, whose expertise has been able to drive forward specific linkages to clusters and sectors within the North West.

5. Should the CCLRC be merged with the large facilities operations conducted by the PPARC to create a Large Facilities Research Council?

The NWUA would welcome the proposal to create such an integrated Large Facilities Research Council and favours a model in which there would be a merger between PPARC and CCLRC.

The main issue for the NW region collectively is the formation of the Daresbury Science & Innovation Campus. The NWUA would welcome the recognition of Daresbury as a major Northern UK science site. In the North West the Daresbury Campus will complement the science facilities located across HEI sites, providing a location for those strategic science projects which cannot be accommodated at HEI partner sites.

6. In the event of a merger, should the grant giving functions of PPARC be moved to EPSRC?

NWUA regards any transfer of response mode funding to EPSRC as likely to be inimical to the practice of particle/accelerator science and astronomy. In this area, large facilities are integral to both experimental and theoretical science. Therefore, we would favour the retention of grant-giving functions within the merged Large Facilities Council.

7. What further measures could be taken to improve the effectiveness of the Research Councils?

There are no regional aspects to this question.