

7. SOME FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS IN RESEARCH AND KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

- 7.1 After the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) in 2010 the next few years will see major challenges for the future of research in UK HE. However, although financial issues will dominate, the other factors considered above will also be important, including: increased global competition; constant changes in technology with all the associated implications for scientific and medical research; and greater public and media interest, and - in some quarters - greater public scepticism about how science is conducted (for example the global warming debate).
- 7.2 Governors may look on as interested bystanders as government and the various stakeholder bodies and research interest groups formulate future national research policy, but they will be actively interested in the policy outcomes as these will be central to setting future institutional research strategy. Some of these policy questions have been set out in a recent report produced by Universities UK on 'The Future of Research'⁷⁶, and governors interested in a more comprehensive overview of future UK research might read it. Another useful document on a similar theme is the latest strategic vision of RCUK for the period 2011- 2015 which sets out a number of clear proposed priorities⁷⁷.
- 7.3 From the UUK report and the other sources cited above, there are perhaps four key future challenges that are of direct relevance to governing bodies, and that all governors should watch out for. Each is very briefly summarised below.

Future funding and financial sustainability

- 7.4 The issues discussed in Chapter 4 are not repeated here, but clearly the major concern currently facing the research-active part of the HE sector is future funding. The relative protection of the science research budget (although without allowance for inflation) as part of the 2010 CSR has obviously been welcomed by those concerned, but elsewhere there will be significant funding reductions which are likely to affect the volume of research in many HEIs. Clearly, governors will need to be aware of, and take advice on, action required.
- 7.5 However, as discussed in Chapter 4, a crucial issue for governors is not only the state of national funding for research, but also the institutional financial sustainability of research. In this context the Wakeham Report⁷⁸ - with its recommendations for governing bodies to ensure greater effectiveness and efficiency in financial sustainability for research - is important reading for governors.

Continuing selectivity

- 7.6 The second future challenge of interest to governors is the inevitable continuation towards greater research selectivity. All developments point in this direction, and a

"Excellent research is expensive, but poor research is worthless. There are concerns that the UK system tries to do too much research, that the dispersion of resources across institutions is unbalanced, and that new arrangements are needed to support costly national and international facilities. A national reflection is required about the use of research resources."

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(SEE FOOTNOTE 76)

⁷⁶ Universities UK, (2010), The Future of Research op cit

⁷⁷ RCUK Strategic Vision at www.rcuk.ac.uk/Publications/policy/Pages/StratVision.aspx

⁷⁸ RCUK/Universities UK, (2009), Review of the Impact of Full Economic Costing on the UK Higher Education Sector, op cit

SUGGESTED TASK

As a governor, are you confident that your governing body has the information it needs to consider and approve a strategy for research and knowledge transfer in the next few years?

INFORMATION SOURCES

reduction in research council funding is bound to lead to changes in the nature of grants being awarded. For example, in March 2011 Hefce announced that it had lessened the financial weighting given to research assessed in the 2008 RAE as 'internationally recognised' and redistributed funding to higher rated provision.

- 7.7 As a result, governing bodies will need to be clear that institutional research strategies (and associated internal resource allocation systems) are robust enough to support the difficult decisions that may be necessary about the future of particular research activities or groups that do not meet the challenge of greater selectivity.
- 7.8 One aspect of increasing selectivity - particularly in STEM research - may be greater attention to whether intensive research should continue to be undertaken alongside teaching in university departments or whether separate research institutes are a better approach. There are strong views here, and the Universities UK Future of Research report argues forcefully in favour of the current system, as would most governing bodies in the HEIs concerned. However, others take a different view, for example, an influential review in 2010 on the future role of technology and innovation centres commissioned by Lord Mandelson⁷⁹ questioned whether the current structures provided sufficient encouragement to underpin successful knowledge transfer. Clearly, any such moves would have major implications for the HEIs concerned.

Research partnerships and collaboration

- 7.9 As noted in Chapter 2, another future challenge for HEIs will be the growing need to build partnerships and collaboration as the basis of long term research activity. Such partnerships will not only involve HEIs, but also governments, research funders, and other stakeholder bodies. From a governing body perspective this has practical implications in at least two areas: internationalisation and knowledge transfer. So far as the former is concerned, perhaps the main challenge is for boards to recognise that for many HEIs internationalisation is no longer an optional activity (whose funding might be cut when times are hard), but rather a core element of successful research. Of course, how such internationalisation is funded is itself a challenge, but such costs are increasingly simply part of the overhead of 'doing business' if HEIs are to remain globally competitive in their chosen research fields.

Developing a future research workforce

- 7.10 Finally, governors will have a direct interest in ensuring a high quality research workforce, and although this will be widely recognised by governing bodies, the potential challenges should not be underestimated. As noted in Chapter 6, there are signs of future difficulties in this area, and there are fears of a possible 'brain drain' of experienced UK researchers whose services are in demand elsewhere. Given an increasing dependency on international researchers in some subjects, there are signs of future - but hopefully short term - challenges to their recruitment, because of recent visa restrictions. In this area, the main challenge for governing bodies is likely to be strategic, in trying to ensure that both research and HR strategies are successfully aligned.

⁷⁹ Hauser H, (2010), The Current and Future Role of Technology and Innovation Centres in the UK at www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/innovation/docs/10-843-role-of-technology-innovation-centres-hauser-review