

what's going on

Top DIUS official moves to the Football Association

Ian Watmore, permanent secretary at the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, has been appointed as the chief executive of the English Football Association. At the FA, Watmore will be reunited with David Triesman, the FA's chairman, who was previously a parliamentary under-secretary of state at DIUS. Watmore will begin at the FA in June.

Arts and humanities council consults on way forward

The Arts and Humanities Research Council has opened a consultation on its future direction as it approaches its fourth anniversary on 1 April. In a statement, the council said that it wanted to move away from "unhelpful debates about 'responsive vs directed' or 'individual vs collaborative'" in favour of a 'simpler' strategy, based on both national priorities and those identified by arts and humanities researchers. Philip Esler, the council's chief executive, also said he would stand down at the end of his term in August and return to the University of St Andrews.

Call for overhaul of NERC peer-review college

The Natural Environment Research Council must increase confidence in its peer-review process, an internal review, published on 18 February, said. The quality and balance of membership of NERC's 400-strong peer-review college should be improved, with more members who are leading researchers, the review said. NERC says that it will begin to implement the review in the spring.

BBSRC to probe security of the food supply

The Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council is to develop a strategic roadmap for investigating food security, following a London forum on the issue. The council hosted the meeting for policymakers, scientists, farmers and industrialists on 19 February, with a view to identifying the scientific challenges posed by increasing global demand for food.

letters

Pioneering vision—not

The opening paragraph in an otherwise timely piece by Jenny Thomas [*RF* 18/2/09, p16] cannot go unchallenged. Describing the creation of the Science and Technology Facilities Council as "a pioneering vision" which was "supported by the majority of the scientific community" is breathtaking.

The reality is that no serious case was ever made for the merger of the former PPARC and CCLRC. The merger created a hybrid body with a confused agenda, made worse by an autocratic executive and inadequate Council. The great majority of those in the physics community most affected were initially perplexed, then anxious, and finally dismayed as funding for world-class research was arbitrarily cut.

While Thomas is correct in speculating that the damage to UK science would have been moderated by a more generous dowry in the 2007 Spending Review, there are few grounds to suppose that either science or innovation would not have fared better in the previous regimes. As it is, the damage to the UK's astronomy and particle physics groups, and to our reputation as international partners, will take years to repair.

Meanwhile, there are growing concerns

that the new STFC focus on research and innovation on the Harwell Campus will rely on staff seconded from cash-starved university groups, replicating a trend that has done so much damage over the years to university research in France. Little evidence so far, then, of the "beacon of UK scientific investment" that Thomas believes the STFC could have been. Moreover, it surely is misguided to suggest that the structural problems at the STFC would disappear in the unlikely event of a government bailout.

Ken Pounds
Former chief executive
Particle Physics and Astronomy
Research Council

SMEs deserve better

In 2001, David Sainsbury had the great idea of introducing a support programme based on the successful US Small Business Innovative Research programme.

The resultant UK Small Business Research Initiative was designed to help early-stage, hi-tech small businesses gain greater access to research opportunities by supporting the future procurement needs of government departments. But the UK initiative has never had the success of the US programme because it was not actively

supported by the departments.

In the 2008 Annual Innovation Report, the UK initiative was highlighted as one of the main actions to improve innovation in public procurement. However, the figures tell a different story. The initiative's spend in 2006-7 was £122 million but this was only 0.07 per cent of the public procurement spend (2007-8 figures are not available). But it is actually more depressing than that. In 2007, in the Treasury report on the Science and Innovation strategy, we were told that, in 2005-6, the initiative's spend was £225m—or nearly double the next year's figure. So we are going backwards.

In my experience, small firms do not need research contracts, they need development contracts to take their ideas forward. Isn't it time to re-route this funding into SME development contracts and also to focus government action on areas where there is real scope for procurement improvements. For example, we should implement the recommendations of DeAnne Julius' report into the public services industry, which is estimated to account for 6 per cent of UK GDP.

David Hughes
Managing director
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