

triennial review kieron flanagan

Evolution, not revolution

It's that time again. All non-departmental public bodies, from the Potato Council to the Competition Commission, must be "robustly" reviewed by their sponsor departments; this spring it's the turn of the research councils. The aim is to test whether the function the body performs is still needed and, if so, whether there is a more efficient, effective and accountable way of doing it.

Since the research councils' first and last quinquennial review in 2001, there have been a number of ad hoc policy reviews. Research Councils UK, established following the 2001 review, was itself reviewed two years later. A 2006 review recommended that the Central Council for the Laboratory of the Research Councils be merged with the Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council to form the Science and Technology Facilities Council. And in 2010 the incoming coalition government reviewed all public bodies, in preparation for the much-hyped bonfire of the quangos.

The present triennial review is not a review of government science policy, and won't directly affect spending, although that will be reviewed as part of the spending review for 2015-16. Oh, and the Technology Strategy Board is also (separately) under review. Are you still with me?

The model of a scientist-led body autonomously disbursing funds to researchers can be traced back to the granting of the Medical Research Council's Royal Charter in 1920. It's been around for a long time, and no matter how often it's reviewed, it's unlikely to change much. The government has stated its commitment to the so-called Haldane principle of the independence of research from government that supposedly underpins this model, and is unlikely to have the stomach for another set of major reforms at this point in the electoral cycle.

The councils' functions, then, are highly unlikely to be judged redundant. Indeed, ministers have already said as much. So what could come out of the review?

There has been speculation that the number of councils could be reduced, perhaps even to a single unitary research council. Consolidation could be sought on the grounds of efficiency, better coordination and better support for interdisciplinary research. However, with the councils already sharing services and cross-council programmes delivered through RCUK, it is hard to believe much more can be gained in this regard.

Such a move would take intrinsically political decisions about funding

across the disciplines out of politicians' hands. How could a single, all-powerful council or chief executive be held accountable, either by taxpayers or the scientific community? A unitary science, engineering, social science, arts and humanities council with the same level of autonomy as the existing research councils is surely a political non-starter.

A more modest restructuring might be proposed, though there is no reason to believe fewer, larger councils will be better than more, smaller ones, and any reorganisation will bring significant costs.

CONSULTATION QUESTIONS ABOUT how closely research council objectives are or should be aligned to policy have raised alarm in some quarters, but governments have long earmarked funding outside the core science budget for their own priorities, and the existing set-up doesn't seem to rule out ministers giving directions to research councils. In practice, where research councils have aligned their priorities with the government's—such as the Arts and Humanities Research Council's emphasis on the big society—it seems to have been under their own initiative.

The review is perhaps most likely to recommend better coordination and more cross-working, with some incremental modifications, such as adjustments to councils' remits or a stronger role for RCUK.

New governance arrangements might be proposed, though it is hard to see what can really happen without structural changes. A requirement that prioritisation be more open and accountable would be welcomed in those parts of the scientific community disturbed by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council's Shaping Capability exercise, which aimed to focus work on "areas of strength and UK national importance".

Could the review recommend a stronger relationship between the councils and the TSB? The TSB is already a research council under the terms of the Science and Technology Act 1965, and is based with the other councils in Swindon. Might it join RCUK? There may be advantages to more coordinated funding of basic and applied research, as long as the different roles and rationales of each are respected.

And when all this has blown over, we have the triennial review of the Higher Education Funding Council for England to look forward to. Given the dramatic changes in the funding of English higher education teaching, that one will be worth watching.

More to say? Email comment@ResearchResearch.com

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paul crowther

Here we go again?

My PhD was funded by the Science and Engineering Research Council, and my first postdoctoral grant came via the Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council. Jumping to the present, my students and postdocs are supported by the Science and Technology Facilities Council. Anyone unfamiliar with the recent history of the UK research councils might suspect that I have either changed fields during my research career or that I work across several disciplines.

In fact, it is the scope and remit of the councils supporting my research that has ebbed and flowed. Overseas colleagues—even British ex-pats—often ask: “Just what is your funding agency called these days?”

The spectre of another round of reorganisation hangs over the grandiose-sounding Triennial Review of the Research Councils. Ominously, the recent consultation asked whether seven research councils is the ‘right’ number. Starting from scratch, one would be unlikely to cut the UK research cake into seven slices. But this is what previous governments have chosen to do.

Academics of all stripes would be wise to pay attention to the review, given that previous versions have led to the creation of the umbrella organisation Research Councils UK and the highly criticised Shared Services Centre.

Whatever Ceri Smith’s team at the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills recommends, the issue of cross-disciplinary research will not be easily resolved. Researchers in my department work at the boundary between biology and physics, but each science would still need its own division within Polaris House even if all research councils were merged.

The most dramatic submission to the consultation has come from the Wellcome Trust [*RF 27/3/13, p2*]. The trust expressed dissatisfaction with the STFC’s management of large facilities such as the Diamond Light Source and ISIS at the Rutherford Appleton Laboratory, and hinted they would be better run centrally by RCUK.

If these suggestions from an influential voice are accepted, the wheel will have turned full circle. Large facilities at the Rutherford Appleton and Daresbury Laboratories were administered by the Council for the Central Laboratory of the Research Councils as recently as 2007.

Since the STFC’s well-publicised early difficulties, due to the hurried merger of the CCLRC and PPARC, a change in senior management has improved matters. The 2009 decision by the then science minister Paul Drayson to create the Large Facilities Steering Group, run by RCUK, also helped diffuse tensions created by the STFC’s dual

role in awarding grants to the areas formerly covered by PPARC and running the UK’s national laboratories for use by other communities.

Despite being represented on the LFSG, the Wellcome Trust is dissatisfied with arrangements that leave ISIS underused. If civil servants heed the trust’s advice and look to a beefed-up RCUK to administer cross-disciplinary facilities, we might see a return to a PPARC-like council. Management of international subscriptions—including counterparts to Diamond and ISIS in Grenoble, Cern for particle physics, the European Southern Observatory for astronomy and the Edinburgh-based Astronomy Technology Centre—could fall to either research council or umbrella body.

Many astronomers and particle and nuclear physicists would be delighted if the STFC became a conventional research council once more. But there is no guarantee that giving large facilities to RCUK would result in PPARC-lite. Such a council would be relatively small, so the opportunity might instead be taken to cut the number of research councils to six, in a step toward the coalition’s pledge to reduce the number and cost of quangos—not so much a bonfire as a sparkler.

In this case, grants supporting these disciplines would probably shift to the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council. Some STFC-funded scientists would favour such a move, although others would be concerned about how the council’s controversial Shaping Capability strategy would translate to blue-sky subjects. Astronomers might instead wish to transfer their grants to the Natural Environment Research Council, which has experience of operating overseas research facilities and relies heavily on satellites overseen by the UK Space Agency.

There are certainly appealing aspects to relieving the STFC of the management of cross-disciplinary facilities, or moving its grants to the EPSRC. But reorganisation doesn’t come cheap; further changes would put additional strain on the research councils’ flat cash settlements, the purchasing power of which grows weaker each year.

I also worry about the effect on research of yet another reorganisation, so soon after the last one. In my working life, several UK research councils have been established. Some of them, such as PPARC, have already been abolished. UK scientists working in particle physics and astronomy might now be wondering whether the STFC will be next, and what the consequences might be. *Something to add? Email comment@ResearchResearch.com*

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