

**Minutes of the UKRI Board Meeting of 18 March 2020**

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<b>Board Attendees</b>	
Sir John Kingman (Chair)	Professor Dame Sally Davies
Professor Sir Mark Walport	Professor Sir Ian Diamond
Mike Blackburn	Fiona Driscoll
Lord Browne (left at start of item 7)	Sir Harpal Kumar
Sir Peter Bazalgette	Professor Max Lu (left at start of item 7)
Professor Julia Black	Vivienne Parry
Professor Sir Leszek Borysiewicz	Mustafa Suleyman
Lord Willetts	
<b>Attendees</b>	
Isobel Stephen	Helen Cross (item 4b)
Sue Donaldson	Freddie Jones (item 4b)
Alex Marsh	Andrew Thompson (item 4c)
Jo Shanmugalingam, BEIS	Tim Wheeler (item 4c)
David Sweeney (item 4b)	Harriet Wallace, BEIS (AOB item)
<b>Secretariat</b>	
Chris Chudziak	Amy Smith
Magda North	Emma-Jane Batt

**Time: 10.15am – 12:15pm**

**Date: 18 March 2020**

**Location: By Zoom**

**1. Welcome & introductions**

1.1 The Chair welcomed members of the Board and thanked them for participating in the meeting by video conference. He welcomed by email comments on items circulated for comment by correspondence as well as any detailed comments on items discussed within the meeting.

1.2 Sue Donaldson the new Chief People Officer was warmly welcomed to UKRI.

**2. Update on Covid-19**

2.1 Mark Walport provided an update on the strands of activity.

### Operational readiness

2.2 The priority was to look after staff and to keep UKRI's business going. The Gold (chaired by Mark), Silver (chaired by Mike Blackburn) and Bronze command structure for business continuity was working well, and staff knew who to contact for support. Staff had been moved to home working within 24 hours of the Government's announcement. Ensuring staff with reasonable adjustments were able to carry out their roles from home was in hand. At the recent staff meeting held by video conference 4,000 staff members had dialled-in at its peak and it was acknowledged that the crisis would provide opportunities for improving ways of working for staff in the future. Over time it was anticipated that the lack of social contact in the workplace could lead to isolation for some staff. This was an area Sue Donaldson would take forward, as well as line managers.

2.3 In the main, logistics were working well at present. Making payments to funding recipients was a priority, which involved close working with UKSBS whose staff were also homeworking. Planning was underway to minimise impacts on grant-making processes and applications and to work with UKRI's communities to keep business going as usual.

### Directed research and development

2.4 UKRI was working closely and proactively with the Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Officer, and would continue to do so. The current role of MRC units at Imperial College, the immunology unit in Oxford and the virology unit at Glasgow were noted, as was the short order calls for grants on Covid-19 research made in recent weeks, through which recipients had been informed of the outcome on the same day.

### Providing information to the public

2.5 UKRI had been asked to provide information to the public on research being undertaken on Covid-19. The team was working at pace to set up a website where interested members of the public could find out about research undertaken across the sector. Vivienne Parry was providing support to make the information accessible to lay readers. Mark Walport also noted media interviews he was undertaking in relation to Covid 19.

2.6 In discussion by the Board, the major financial crisis and workforce issues for UKRI partners and for the research community were recognised. The role UKRI could play in supporting discussions around financial sustainability was discussed, whilst acknowledging that UKRI was not the funder of last resort. The roles of the Office for Students and HMT were noted, and it was important to understand how the recent support package announced by HMT would support partners.

2.7 UKRI action to date was commended, and it was noted that UKRI had an important role to play as convener and intermediary for partners affected by Covid-19. In particular it should work with the academic community to help assess the scale of the issue and to manage expectations. The impact of Covid-19 on the charity sector was also noted. UKRI was currently intelligence-gathering to understand what UKRI should prioritise in these unprecedented times.

Whilst attention was focussed on short-term issues at present, the need to develop meaningful research on the medium and longer term impacts was emphasized. UKRI might also have a role in determining which research needed to continue on the basis of its national significance. There might also be partnership opportunities with ONS in work on impacts on the economy and trade.

2.8 In terms of UKRI funding and budget decisions in the year ahead, it was helpful that the Government recognised the importance of R&D. UKRI would continue to look for flexibility on ring-fencing and allocating funding between years, and the finance team would work to manage the impacts of Covid-19 on budgets.

### **3. CEO report**

3.1 Mark Walport reported on activities since the last Board, highlighting:

- That the CFO had been appointed and would start soon.
- Contingency arrangements for the CEO role.
- The positive Budget announcement through which the Government had committed to increase public R&D investment to £22 billion per year by 2024-25. The Government's plans to invest £800 million in a UK 'ARPA' to fund high-risk, high-reward science were also noted. It was recognised that ARPA provided an interesting new addition to the R&D landscape and UKRI's experience of working with diverse funding partners was noted.
- On open access there was no further update from the US.

### **4. UKRI 2025**

4.1 Isobel Stephen introduced the item, noting that the developing strategy, proposed timetabling and engagement plans had been produced before the escalation in the Government's response on Covid-19. She sought views from the Board, therefore, on both strategy and on next steps given current constraints.

#### **4a. UKRI 2025 strategy**

4.2 Feedback on the developing strategy was very positive. In discussion by the Board the following points were made:

- There should be one UKRI strategy with associated strategies nested within, and it should focus on the roles of UKRI as a major funder in UK research and development, its role in convening and mobilising, and as an employer within UKRI and in the research and development community.
- There was an opportunity to stress UKRI's role in promoting the breadth and depth of research and development; to reflect longer term aspirations (ie 20-30 years) for UKRI and for the UK; to reflect the global brand of GCRF and its role in raising the profile of UKRI and the UK internationally; to consider ethics, particularly in relation to Artificial Intelligence; and to reflect the strategic ambitions on economic growth developed by Innovate UK.
- A focus on climate change should be maintained, with the Board welcoming the draft paper on Clean Environment and Sustainable Growth, and its further development.

4.3 On timings for consultation, the Board discussed the impact of Covid-19. BEIS was working through with Ministers what the impact would mean for relative timings on policy announcements.

4.4 Lord Browne was thanked for bringing together a roundtable discussion for the CEO with captains of industry which represented an important step in leveraging private investment and engagement.

#### **4b. UKRI and the government's 'R&D Place Strategy'**

4.5 David Sweeney introduced a discussion of place strategy. In discussion by the Board it was noted:

- UKRI needed to view all of its activities through the lens of 'place', as well as drawing attention to 'place' through specific programmes or projects. There should therefore be close integration between proposals for place strategy and the UKRI 2025 strategy.
- R&D activity relied on post doctorate and PhD communities from overseas. This workforce needed to be engaged on the place agenda and to working in different parts of the UK.
- Levelling up would be dependent on regions improving their wider skills bases. From an R&D perspective, this was not only about the people with the skills to 'do' the R&D, but ensuring the wider population benefited from R&D-led growth, with a potential role for universities and further education colleges.
- Support was needed for organisations less experienced in making funding applications, for example, by buddying with more experienced organisations – although care was needed not to drive perverse incentives.
- Funding criteria were needed to determine the balance between excellence in research and other criteria such as strengthening capacity. Relevant work on funding criteria had been previously undertaken within EU funding programmes.
- Board members were keen to provide support on the 'place' agenda and engaging communities outside the south east.
- Where relevant, the regional presence offered by the Knowledge Transfer Network and by Innovate UK should be exploited.
- UKRI was examining its own presence across the UK in order to ensure it was attracting talent outside of the South East.

#### **4c. UKRI International Strategy**

4.6 Andrew Thompson and Tim Wheeler introduced a discussion of international strategy and the following points were made:

- The creation of UKRI had enabled significant relationship-building with ambassadors and the FCO. UKRI's value-add was clearly visible in its international activities and should be celebrated in UKRI's international strategy.

- The importance of the GCRF in raising the profile of UKRI across the world. It was emphasised that the GCRF was a great asset for the UK in a global world.
- The 'non-EU', 'non-ODA' bilateral and multilateral portfolio and multi-lateral collaborations beyond Horizon Europe needed a prominent focus, and there was further scope to expand on the opportunities available.
- The strategy needed to disaggregate the need for UK businesses to think globally from encouraging overseas investment in the UK. Both were critical.
- Encouraging talent to work overseas and bring their experiences back to the UK was important, and two-way incentives were needed.

## 5. Setting 2020/21 Allocations

5.1 Details were yet awaited on UKRI's allocation for 2020/21, following the Budget announcement, and in particular on the Government's plans to provide up to £400 million in 2020-21 for world-leading research, infrastructure and equipment. BEIS confirmed that it was working at pace with HMT and UKRI to confirm UKRI's settlement. Accounting Officer letters had been exchanged in recent weeks with BEIS on the risks to UKRI in operating without an agreed operating budget for 2020/21.

5.2 The need to act quickly once a formal letter was received from BEIS was discussed, and whether to delegate this to the Executive Committee for later ratification by the Board.

**Decision: The Board agreed** they wished to approve decisions on any new funding to UKRI in 2020/21 and to convene via video conference at short notice in order to do so. **The Board agreed** to delegate decisions on BAU funding for UKRI in 2020/21 to the Executive.

## 6. Reports from Board sub-committees

### Audit Risk Assurance Performance Committee (ARAPC)

6.1 Fiona Driscoll updated the Board on the meeting held by video conference on 16 March. UKRI was working well with NAO: no concerns had been raised at the interim audit and accounting judgements had been signed-off; the year-end process was running smoothly. Tax issues raised by HMRC were yet to be resolved. Government Internal Audit Agency (GIAA) work was also progressing smoothly with reporting on schedule for year end and recommendations being implemented; an updated MOU and Charter had been agreed with GIAA; the forward plan for three years had been approved. UKRI's corporate risk register had also been discussed and there was more work to do on risk appetite. Good progress had been made on work underway with Innovate UK. ARAPC self-assessment was underway.

### Nominations & Remuneration Committee

6.2 John Kingman noted the meeting held on 27 February and drew attention to significant steps taken on performance management for UKRI staff including introducing 360 feedback for senior managers. He also noted arrangements for performance-related pay. The issues raised on STEM allowances would be followed up with BEIS. Delays associated with the 19/20 pay remit were noted which meant that awards would be delayed for the majority of UKRI staff.

## **7. AOB**

7.1 The Chair noted the process in train to appoint a new CEO and the strong field of candidates. He was working with BEIS to maintain momentum given the constraints created by Covid-19.

7.2 The Chair also noted the planned visit to the Laboratory of Molecular Biology in Cambridge for the May Board meeting which was likely to be postponed. A decision would be taken nearer the time. Dame Sally Davies was thanked for offering to host the Board's dinner at Trinity College.

7.3 Max Lu and Lord Browne left the meeting. Harriet Wallace joined the call.

7.4 Mark Walport noted media interest in a number of grants made by EPSRC to UK partners linked to Huawei. He confirmed that the grants had been handled in the usual way and that a response to the media had been issued. In discussion it was noted that the Board's role on issues which posed potential reputational risks needed further consideration, including how BEIS could best support the Board. An SRO with appropriate clearance was needed to oversee such issues where they arose in the future. It was felt that each case needed to be considered on its own merits and to be considered against a set of principles.

**Action: Emma Lindsell/Isobel Stephen** to set out to the Board the principles and process to be followed for UKRI funding cases which were considered potentially diplomatically sensitive.

7.5 Support was also needed for the university sector to enable them to identify risks and issues when they put forward funding proposals. Trusted Research from the Centre for the Protection of National Infrastructure provided guidance in this area.

7.6 Mark Walport also noted Freedom of Information requests which had been raised in relation to the balance of funding across UKRI's portfolio in proportion to need. It was agreed that the matter related to UKRI's overall strategic direction and decisions on how funding was allocated, which would be discussed with the Board in due course.

**Action: Emma Lindsell/Isobel Stephen** to bring a discussion to the Board on the balance of funding across UKRI's portfolio.

7.7 The Chair thanked members for working with the remote technology and thanked the Secretariat team for bringing the meeting together.

**Date of Next Meeting: 13 May 2020 at the Laboratory of Molecular Biology, Cambridge. Decision on venue to be taken nearer the time.**