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UKRI ENGINEERING AND PHYSICAL SCIENCES RESEARCH COUNCIL

DRAFT MINUTES OF THE VIRTUAL COUNCIL MEETING HELD ON 20 JULY 2021

Council Members: Professor M E Smith (Chair)
Professor Dame L Gladden
Professor A Etheridge
Professor N Jennings
Ms S John
Professor M Schröder
Dr J de Sousa
Professor I Walmsley
Dr P Williams
Professor A Wright

Observers: Professor S Sharples

Executive: Dr A Bourne
Professor C Deane
Ms S Francis (Item 8 only)
Mr G Mapstone (until 1pm)
Ms J Nicholson
Dr K Pandya
Professor M Parsons
Dr N Viner
Dr A Wall (Item 9)

Others: Ms Emma Lindsell, UKRI (for Item 5 only)
Mrs Siobhan Peters, UKRI (from 10:00-12:45)
Ms Helen Pearce, UKRI (for Item 5 only)
Mr Tom Crawley, UKRI (for Item 5 only)
Ms Jane Skyes, UKRI (for Item 5 only)
Mr Gemmill, UKRI (for Item 6 only)
Mrs Sofield, UKRI (for Item 6 only)
Professor Duncan, UKRI (for Item 9 only)

Secretary: Dr N Goldberg

1. Introductory Remarks

- 1.1 Professor Smith welcomed everyone to the meeting; he reminded members of the protocols for running this virtual meeting of Council and outlined the key business.
- 1.2 Apologies were received from Professors Belcher and Whitley.
- 1.3 Professor Smith indicated that Professor Sharples has now changed her status on the Council to an observer as a result of her new position as CSA to the Department for Transport.
- 1.4 There were no other new declarations of interest from Council members.

2. Draft Minutes of the Meeting on 19-20 May 2021

- 2.1 Council agreed the record of the last meeting.

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3. Actions and Matters Arising

- 3.1 There were six actions from the last meeting. Council noted those that were either completed or were in hand.

4. Executive Report (EPSRC 12-21)

- 4.1 The Executive Report paper covered a number of items, several of which were discussed following verbal updates given by the Executive. Professor Gladden highlighted the arrival of a new UKRI Chair since the previous Council meeting.
- 4.2 Dr Chmura gave an update on the Government's Innovation Strategy. **Minute not included as contains exempt material, at the time of publication, under the terms of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.** Council agreed to focus a discussion on the content of the strategy, once published, at an upcoming meeting.
- ACTION: Dr Goldberg**
- 4.3 Mr Mapstone updated Council on the current financial position, focussing on the indications from BEIS regarding the financial settlement for the core research allocation for 22/23. **Minute not included as contains exempt material, at the time of publication, under the terms of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.**
- 4.4 Dr Bourne gave an update on Trusted Research, highlighting key points of discussion from the Council sub-group on this topic. He then discussed the salient points of the National Security and Investment Act in the context of ensuring that any work on Trusted Research ensures consistency with this Act. Mrs Peters reflected that EPSRC's work in this area has helped lay the groundwork for wider UKRI activity on Trusted Research. Council appreciated the update and requested that the Executive keep Council abreast of further work by the Council sub-group.
- 4.5 Dr Bourne then updated Council on the latest progress in establishing the process for associating to the Horizon Europe Programme, with specific regard to the Quantum Technologies component of the programme. **Minute not included as contains exempt material, at the time of publication, under the terms of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.** A final decision on UK participation in the Quantum calls is anticipated in the autumn.

5. Discussion on Spending Review 2021 with the UKRI Executive Director Strategy, Performance and Engagement

- 5.1 Dr Pandya introduced this session on the Spending Review 2021 (SR21) and then allowed Professor Smith to lead Council members in a brief preparatory discussion.
- 5.2 Professor Smith then welcomed Ms Lindsell, UKRI Executive Director, Strategy, Performance and Engagement, to the meeting. She began by clarifying that the SR21 commission from BEIS had not yet been received and that the timetable for UKRI's submission would be extremely tight. Ms Lindsell then highlighted some of the current government landscape and priorities and emphasised the need to build a SR21 case in this wider context whilst ensuring that our bid illustrated how UKRI can deliver our vision for the research and innovation system. She explained the modelling of possible effects of both growth and flat overall settlements on UKRI's potential budget. Council then broke out into smaller groups to discuss ways of bringing the impacts of our investments to life, future opportunities, and how to ensure the bid speaks to EPSRC's different communities.

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- 5.3 **Minute not included as contains exempt material, at the time of publication, under the terms of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.**
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- 5.5 Professor Deane then updated Council on the evolution of the UKRI strategy and its various components including guiding principles. Key points from a UKRI Strategy Committee round-table discussion on the strategy were discussed. This helped Council to reinforce suggestions for how to strengthen the SR21 bid, for example the need for articulating why rather than just how UKRI is critical to the R&D system.
- 5.6 Council highlighted several key points for consideration and inclusion in the SR21 bid, including the following:
- i) The importance of clearly demonstrating the additionality of the outcomes of our investments.
 - ii) The need for a better articulation of how our portfolio is dynamic and continually evolves.
 - iii) A better articulation of the value of PhD students to the system.
- 5.7 Council welcomed the opportunity to input to the framing of the UKRI bid and are keen to advocate on UKRI's behalf if given the key messages. The Executive will continue to adapt EPSRC's content to the BEIS request and the UKRI bid.
- 6. Reforming our Business (RoB) focusing on the Simpler and Better Funding Programme (SBF)**
- 6.1 Professor Smith welcomed Mr Gemmill, Reforming our Business (RoB) Portfolio Director, and Mrs Sofield, Simpler and Better Funding (SBF) Programme Director, to the meeting. Mr Gemmill began by highlighting the structure and governance of the programme and next steps, after which Mrs Sofield explained the role of the Simpler and Better Funding (SBF) Programme within this.
- 6.2 The engagement strategy for SBF was touched upon and Councils were asked to encourage their communities to engage with the programme. Mrs Sofield briefly discussed the interplay with the BEIS review of Bureaucracy. She then clarified that improved expert review was a structural problem, i.e. complicated forms that are repetitive and take a lot of time to read, eating into the time expert reviewers have. The programme will aim to simplify the experience for reviewers to maximise their time.
- 6.3 Council members gave several examples of where it was important to ensure the programmes take into account needs specific to the EPS community. One such example includes the essential ability to incorporate formulae into proposal documentation. Another example included the timing of rejection emails from the Je-S system that currently arrive at midnight, causing distress to applicants in an email read at a time when they are less likely to be with colleagues. There was also a question around whether the programme would enable less bureaucratic peer review practice allowing reviewers to focus purely on the criteria. The use of digital identifiers was also touched upon.
- 6.4 Professor Smith thanked the team for the update and acknowledged the complexity of the programme. It was agreed that EPSRC had been at the forefront of achieving efficiency for several years already and there was strong support for ensuring the success of both programmes to enable a more efficient wider organisation.
- 6.5 Council welcomed the update and are keen to see the development of a system which is more flexible to future needs and the needs of different users both internally and externally.

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7. UKRI Infrastructure Fund Update (EPSRC 13-21)

- 7.1 Ms Nicholson introduced a paper that provided an update on the UKRI Infrastructure Fund for Round One, following the Spending Review (SR) 2020 settlement, our current knowledge of the Round Two process and bids that have been prioritised following the EPSRC Statement of Need process and next steps.
- 7.2 The scale of resource that might be available for the next round of bids will depend on SR21. The Infrastructure Advisory Committee (IAC) will also provide further clarification on the rules of engagement and they will be asked to consider the balance across the UKRI portfolio. It was clarified that digital aspects are predominantly encompassed in the e-infrastructure programme, and EPSRC are developing an internal strategy covering digital infrastructure.
- 7.3 Council noted the update and acknowledged the progress made on round two for this activity, welcoming further planned updates at upcoming meetings.

8. Science, Engineering and Technology Board (SETB) Update (EPSRC 14-21)

- 8.1 Professor Deane introduced a paper that provided an update on the recent activities of the EPSRC Science, Engineering and Technology Board (SETB), along with details of the Institutes Evaluation meeting held on 12 May 2021, and information on the Future Institutes Framework for continued monitoring and evaluation of the EPSRC institutes.
- 8.2 EPSRC's Big Ideas activity was discussed in more detail. Examples were given of areas where Big Ideas had been used in contexts such as developing bids for the Strategic Priorities Fund, feeding into Spending Review opportunities, and informing theme and strategy approaches. They have also been used to influence other parts of UKRI and beyond, for example Next Generation Digital Infrastructure. Council noted and welcomed the progress and contribution of this activity towards delivering EPSRC's goals and objectives.
- 8.3 The SETB discussion of EPSRC institutes and associated recommendations were shared and the feedback on areas of added value offered by the institutes was noted. The value and importance of branding for these institutes was discussed as a powerful tool for enabling them to achieve their goals more widely. It was suggested that the Big Ideas activity is another route through which early ideas for future institutes could potentially be received.
- 8.4 It was suggested that EPSRC provide evidence externally for the variety of ways in which Big Ideas are progressed once received and how they have been used so far. This was regarded as an important way keep the community motivated in engaging with the activity.
- 8.5 **Minute not included as contains exempt material, at the time of publication, under the terms of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.**
- 8.7 Council welcomed the update and endorsed SETB's value in reviewing ideas for use in multiple areas including SPF bids, SR content and theme strategies. They also recognised the value of SETB in reviewing our institutes and in helping them evolve and fit into the national landscape.
- ### 9. EPSRC Review of Doctoral Education Recommendations for Approval (EPSRC 15-21)
- 9.1 Professor Duncan, UKRI Director of Talent and Skills, leading on the New Deal for Post Graduate Researchers, attended this agenda item.

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- 9.2 Dr Wall introduced this paper where Council was invited to consider findings and recommendations from EPSRC's review of support for doctoral education and approve the recommendations to guide development of our doctoral education portfolio. Professor Duncan briefly highlighted the BEIS People and Culture Strategy with its three strands around people, culture and talent. The innovation strategy contains announcements about the visa system which will have interplay especially with the talent strand of the former strategy. Professor Duncan and Dr Wall also briefly discussed the new deal for postgraduate researchers. Council were keen to know how the new deal might impact our portfolio and the cost implications of this.
- 9.3 There was a robust discussion about future funding for international students as well as ways of mitigating for a flat-cash scenario in the face of inflation effects. Current practice in other countries such as Germany and Holland were discussed. Outcomes from the recent workshops with students were shared with Council, including the important and surprising learning point that many students do not seem aware of the terms and conditions on their training grants, for example around rights for sick leave pay. This has prompted the team to consider ways of making this information more accessible and obvious to students. The recommendations were then discussed and clarified.
- 9.4 Council noted the input and findings of the doctoral education review and agreed the recommendations, with implementation depending on affordability.

10. Any Other Business

- 10.1 Council noted the Communications Update information paper (EPSRC 16-21).
- 10.2 Council agreed the messages that should be conveyed from today's meeting in its report to the UKRI Board.
- 10.3 Professor Smith thanked Dr Mapstone for his contribution as EPSRC's Finance Business Partner on behalf of Council as well as Professor Gladden, commending his patience and thoroughness.
- 10.4 Professor Gladden congratulated Dr Goldberg on her promotion to Deputy Director for Planning, Operations and Governance and thanked her for her contributions and hard work as EPSRC Council Secretary. Her integrity, commitment and humour had been greatly appreciated.

11. Next Meeting

- 11.1 Professor Smith reminded members that the next meeting is on 06 October and would be convened virtually.

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