



Council Meeting
Thursday, 1 February 2024
12:30 – 16:00
Hybrid Meeting

Minutes

Attendees	
Council Members:	Professor Dame Jessica Corner (JC) (Chair) Dr Carol Bell (CB) Dr Phil Clare (PC) Ms Sharon Ellis (SE) Dame Janet Finch (JF) Professor Cathy Gormley-Heenan (CGH) Professor Ian Greer (IG) Dr Anne-Marie Imafidon (AMI) Professor Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad (CRP) Mr Mike Rees (MR) (SIM) Professor Graeme Reid (GR) Professor Colin Riordan (CR)
Observers	Ms Harriet Barnes (HB), HEFCW Dr Helen Cross (HC), SFC Professor Trevor McMillan (TM)
Officers	Ms Alice Frost (AF) Dr Steven Hill (SH) Associate Director of Insight & Engagement Associate Director of Strategy and Planning
Apologies	Dr David Blaney (DB), HEFCW Ms Moira Doherty (ND), DfE-NI Ms Jacqui Dovey (JD), RE Ms Susan Lapworth (SL), OfS RE Associate Director of Governance and Risk Mr Dan Shah (DSH), UKRI
Guests	RE Head of Data and Evidence Director of Research, IoZ
Secretariat	Secretariat Officers



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1.	Welcome and Introductions
1.1	JC welcomed all to the meeting. Apologies were noted from David Blaney, Moira Doherty, Jacqui Dovey, Susan Lapworth, RE Associate Director of Governance and Risk, and Dan Shah. No conflicts of interest were raised.
1.2	JC thanked outgoing Council members, Phil Clare and Ian Greer, and outgoing Council observer, Trevor McMillan, for their engagement and contribution to Council.
	<u>Minutes of the 23 November 2023 Meeting</u>
1.3	Minor amendments to the minutes were received in advance of the meeting from JF. With the incorporation of these changes, the minutes were accepted as being an accurate record of the previous meeting. There were no actions outstanding from the previous meeting and no matters arising not otherwise covered under the planned agenda.
2.	UKRI Strategy Update
2.1	JC provided an update from the UKRI Strategy Directorate (on behalf of DSH), as follows:
	<u>UKRI Strategy Anniversary</u>
2.2	UKRI will be releasing a series of DSIT achievements in recognition of the one year anniversary of its' formation. This will include R&D achievements and potentially the Government response to the Tickell Review.
	<u>DSIT and Spending Review</u>
2.3	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The relationship between Research England (RE) and DSIT continues to develop, with further appointments still being made following the appointment of the new minister, Andrew Griffiths. Council noted that colleagues from RE have contributed to the Secretary of State's speech.• Focus is beginning to shift to preparations for the next spending review (SR), with the expectation that this is likely to be a one-year rollover followed by a multi-year SR. UKRI will be feeding into the DSIT commission, and RE will be continuing to consider what a multi-year rollover means for its activity.
	<u>Financial Sustainability</u>
2.4	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• JC noted that UKRI has established a financial sustainability working group as a sub-group of the UKRI Board and an internal working group, attended by JC and DM as RE representatives. Work is being done across these fora to look at potential scenarios and to consider analyses of the financial gap between HE research and its' cost (a gap of around £5billion per year). This is also impacted by the fact that student fees are no longer covering the cost of education and there is a reduction in the number of international students attending UK universities.• It was noted that recruitment plans for undergraduate students have not been realised in all cases; this varies across the sector. CRP cited informal correspondence from the Early Career Researcher (ECR) Network and Department for Continuing Education,

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	<p>which outlines how the financial pressure as a result of student recruitment is affecting budgets. Faced with deficits, universities are attempting to freeze internal research budgets: as a result, ECRs are querying the potential impact on their available outputs for REF 2029.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> PC reinforced the need to also consider impacts on knowledge exchange activity.
	<u>Office for Students</u>
2.5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> JC stated that RE is in correspondence with the OfS with a view to ensuring that RE is informed about risks to particular HEPs. Government bodies are also considering how to monitor this across the HE R&I system. JC highlighted the need for RE to increase its current capabilities around independent monitoring of HEPs. Any approach would need to ensure that no additional burden is created for the sector and that it does not duplicate existing data collection. Council queried the OfS' observer role on RE Council and stated that it would be useful for the OfS to provide their perspective of the system given their role.
	Action: JC to invite SL to provide Council with an overview of the HE system from the perspective of the OfS.
3.	Executive Chair's Report
	<u>Place</u>
3.1	JC continues to lead the cross-UKRI programme on behalf of UKRI, aimed at contributing to DSIT targets, and RE colleagues are actively engaging with this work. AF is one of RE's strategic leads in this area, and JC contributes to the UKRI Place strategy group. Key RE initiatives, such as E3 and UKRPIF, are well placed to contribute to the Place agenda. Current efforts are being directed towards considering how work on Place might look in the future and how RE best prepares to address this.
	<u><withheld from publication></u>
3.2	<withheld from publication>.
3.3	<withheld from publication>.
3.4	<withheld from publication>.
3.5	<withheld from publication>.
	<u>Financial Sustainability</u>
3.6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An independent review of the OfS is underway, and the RE Executive Chair and UKRI CEO will feed in their views where relevant. Issues around data and financial sustainability are likely to feature as part of the review. JC is working to ensure that other key stakeholders (such as representatives from the other funding bodies) are involved in the conversation. Council were informed that they could submit comments or provide feedback through JC's office.

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Council queried how RE/UKRI monitors the financial position of HEPs and whether there is a database of financial information for the different providers. JC stated that this information is owned by the OfS, on whom RE and UKRI rely to obtain this information. As RE is a funder and not a regulator, it is not within RE's remit to undertake a systematic assessment of the financial status of HEPs. RE has, however, recently undertaken a 'barometer survey' as a means of assessing the financial health of the sector; further consideration is needed to determine if this is the most appropriate approach. • HC stated that there are integrated systems in Scotland for checking the financial health of HEPs; however, it is difficult to use this data to make inferences about the intent of providers with regard to their research plans or to determine whether the state of an institution's finances has forced them to make difficult decisions. This information would not be evident through reporting until it is too late. • IG highlighted the scale of the issue, citing that, from data contained in PWC reports, it appears that around 40% of HEPs in Northern Ireland are reporting a deficit for 2023-24. In 2022, this report suggested that 43 providers would not have had sufficient funds to cover their debts. This has been impacted by the reduction in numbers of international students. • The need for a collaborative response was acknowledged.
4.	Spinouts Implementation
4.1	Council members were invited to note and comment on the high-level implementation plans to deliver the Government response to the independent review of University spinouts.
4.2	<withheld from publication>.
4.3	AF stated that RE could run a Council mini session for anyone who wants to understand the technical risks of the KE data work.
	Action: The KE team will arrange a Council mini session on the technical risks of the KE data work should members express an interest in such a session.
4.4	The importance of strengthening cross-funding-body discussions around UK-wide data was noted. RE is in discussion with HESA around a more coherent approach to its statutory customer relationships. Issues around sharing of data between REF and UKRI due to differences of governance structures were acknowledged.
4.5	It was agreed that it will be important to ensure that industry investors are aware of the quality of the data produced through the REF and, subsequently, the quality of research coming out of UK HEPs.
4.6	In terms of the Spinout Review, it was felt that KE needs to be considered in the context of each specific HEP as many are undertaking strong KE activity which is not recognised. The implications of the strains on financial sustainability in the UK HE sector need to be

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	acknowledged, and a balanced approach is needed on supporting costs of spinning out across appropriate market returns and public funding support.
5.	Institute of Zoology
5.1	Council noted that a review of the Institute of Zoology (IoZ) has been conducted and the decision has been taken to maintain the level of funding. SH introduced IoZ's Director of Science, who gave a presentation on how funding has been used across the programme of activity at the IoZ.
5.2	JDT outlined the financial relationship with UCL, whereby IoZ pay UCL for honorary status to ensure staff have access to library and online resources. IoZ is not currently connected to UCL tech transfer or business but is exploiting UCL connections to the EU and with Horizon.
5.3	IoZ recently won a DSIT award of £2.3m, which will revolutionise AI capacity; this AI capacity will be used to train algorithms to find biodiversity data in existing datasets.
5.4	Queries were raised around Masters courses and PhDs: the IoZ Director stated that Masters courses are owned by the Royal Veterinary College, UCL and Imperial College with IoZ teaching specific modules on these courses. The aim is for more courses to be run through the Institute.
5.5	JC noted that, in undertaking the review, it has become evident that IoZ might also benefit from an arrangement with one of the other UKRI councils such as NERC, which IoZ will consider further.
5.6	Overall, the presentation was well received by Council, who were complimentary about the role that IoZ plays in the sector. It was agreed that it is important to ensure that IoZ continues to get the support it needs.
6.	RE Strategic Delivery Plan (SDP) Update
6.1	Council was invited to note performance against the SDP for the period 2022–25. Ordinarily, performance against the SDP would be captured in the risk report; however, this report is to provide an interim update at the midway point of the SDP cycle.
6.2	It was noted that there are some areas where progress has not been as fast as hoped. In particular, challenges have been identified relating to EDI, SIRF and financial sustainability. Council queried whether RE should reflect on where resourcing issues are slowing progress.
6.3	It was noted that further work is required around understanding our purpose, particularly around ensuring a 'healthy, diverse and dynamic' sector. It was also agreed that RE could do more to demonstrate impact and outcomes.

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6.4	Challenges around data collection were acknowledged, particularly around EDI data on KE professionals.
6.5	Council queried whether a prioritisation exercise could be undertaken to consider what data is critical for activities in the immediate future versus the longer term. As an example, AI could be used to harvest existing data that HEPs already hold about how their estates are managed. SH agreed that data does exist on HEP systems but thought is required on how to best seek their input and engagement with HESA.
6.6	The Associate Director of Strategy and Planning stated that further engagement will be sought from Council members on the DSIT Funding and Priorities letter and on the SDP for 2025 onwards.
7.	Risk, Assurance and Governance Report
7.1	Council was invited to note the update on strategic risks and RE's assurance programme. Council noted there have been no changes to risk levels since the last meeting, but that some changes have occurred since the risk register was updated for the November 2023 meeting.
7.2	<withheld from publication>.
7.3	<withheld from publication>.
7.4	<withheld from publication>.
	<u>Meeting Arrangements</u>
7.5	Council noted that the next meeting will be held on 9 May 2024.
7.6	Council agreed to reduce the number of formal meetings per year from five to four with effect from the 2025 meeting cycle. They agreed that additional informal meeting opportunities, such as through HEP visits, would be welcomed and that additional mini sessions could be arranged to enable more focused consideration of specific issues.
8.	CLOSED SESSION
8.1	A separate note of the closed session was agreed via correspondence with RE council members.
9.	AOB
9.1	No further items were raised under AOB.