

ARMA Protagonist September 2016

What to make of UKRI

Within five days in May we had a White Paper on HE, the Queen's Speech announcing that there was to be a new Act of Parliament on HE, and the publication of the draft Higher Education and Research Bill. Whilst this had been trailed, the pace was – and continues to be – faster than many expected.

Since then, we've had the referendum vote to leave the EU, a truncated Conservative Party leadership contest, a new Prime Minister, and the split of higher education and research between two government departments.

As I write this in the middle of July, the new Prime Minister is appointing her cabinet, and Jo Johnson has been reappointed as Minister for Universities and Science, reporting to two Secretaries of State. You will be reading it in September, so apologies in advance if what I write is now completely incorrect!

The Direction for the Future

Included in the draft Higher Education and Research Bill are provisions to create UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). UKRI will incorporate the seven Research Councils, Innovate UK, and the research and knowledge exchange elements of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) as Research England.

Sometimes we might have concerns about the language used in policy documents, such as the White Paper, but it was more easily understandable than the slightly arcane language of the draft Bill!

The reappointment of Jo Johnson does signal the Government's intention to continue with the direction of travel, so we can expect the Bill to make its way through the Parliamentary processes. The House of Commons may concentrate on the elements relating to student fees, whereas the Lords are likely to seek to change the research and innovation aspects.

There has already been much debate and comment on the pros and cons of creating UKRI, which I'll not repeat here, but what could be the practical effects?

Whilst the continuing independence of each element of UKRI has been assured (in Government rhetoric and, in some respects, in the draft Bill), the possibility and likelihood of joint or combined actions across the Councils is more likely. Indeed, this is one of the justifications that the Department for Business, Innovation & Skills (BIS) made for UKRI in its rather thin business case, which you can find here: <http://bit.ly/UKRIBusinessCase>.

GCRF As Model?

It can also be seen in practice through the emerging details of the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF). In this first phase, calls for proposals are being made singly or bilaterally, being funded from individual Council budgets. Some Councils are also delivering block grants to their Impact Acceleration Account recipients, giving the latter the challenge of spending the additional funds by the end of the year (calendar or fiscal, depending on the Council). In future, there is likely to be a more centrally co-ordinated and delivered process.

GCRF represents a great opportunity, but in budget terms it also means a reduction for the rest of the Councils' activities: that was the effect of its announcement in the Autumn

Statement in November 2015 (another tumultuous month: Green Paper, Nurse, Comprehensive Spending Review, Autumn Statement), and is not changed whether the Bill goes through or not.

In this context, where we might envisage more directed calls, both researchers and their institutions will need to be more agile – intellectually and organisationally.

Other Models

The new department in which research finds itself includes Industrial Strategy as part of its name. Will this mean that Innovate UK will not only be well protected, but could it also thrive? Will the Eight (or Nine) Great Technologies be resuscitated? Innovation, as my colleagues at the University of Sussex's Science Policy Research Unit (SPRU) remind me, is at least as much about interactions within and between businesses as it is about the development of research into commercial value.

The exit from the EU will also require changes to the UK funding landscape. Rather than simply adding to existing budgets (assuming that can be afforded, which is not a given), might we see the creation of another super-fund? What would your choice of subject area be?

However, rather than create a new fund (what would come after global challenges?), would it be better to reinvest in the research funded directly by Government, which has suffered significant cutbacks since 2010?

The Road Ahead

All of these happenings and policy changes will mean stepping back from our current models of working: managing and supporting research, rather than concentrating on the financial transaction that is at the centre of many of our processes.

The creation of UKRI (currently targeted to begin in 2018) and the Brexit processes will keep many of us busy, and take quite some time to settle down. Our challenges are to continue being innovative in supporting research, whilst enabling the generation and application of knowledge.

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