

ARMA Protagonist November 2019

Countdown conundrum

The current political impasse is causing sleepless nights and bun fights throughout the country. In the research arena, perhaps more than any other, the questions about funding, international influence and the part we play in maintaining the research equilibrium are mounting up.

Nearly four years have passed, and we remain in an unending B-word limbo. Even with an agreed withdrawal, the future relationship with the EU needs to be negotiated. The election has simply added to the melee.

Meanwhile, we await UKRI's review on the 'balance of funding in the dual support system', and questions about its contents are numerous. Will the Smith-Reid review of international funding and collaboration be implemented by the next government? How actively will the political parties express their plans for research, innovation and education in their manifestos?

In addition, what will be the commitments to spend on R&D? (specifically, the target of spending 2.4% of GDP – which is only the OECD average – or taking it to 3%, which was the EU's Lisbon Declaration target set back in 2000 and intended for 2010). What will be the fate of the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), which is up for review? (Indeed, there will be a £3 million tender for the evaluation of the GCRF. Yes, you read that correctly!).

Others have commented on the scale of increase in funding – public and private – that meeting the 2.4% target would mean. We should not assume this bonanza, should it occur, will primarily benefit universities and the like – about two thirds of funds for R&D come from the private sector, and about two thirds of R&D activity take place in the private sector.

Accessing any additional funding is likely to require the addressing of other people's agendas. This does not necessarily mean being wholly utilitarian, but it does mean some flexing of approaches, topics, timescales and delivery mechanisms (e.g. the blending of research, innovation and skills development). We have only just started to experience what this might mean through the Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund.

Steering the conversation

Aside from the opportunities that additional funding might bring, the research sector is being challenged by cultural and behavioural matters. Many of my recent conversations have been about these, rather than technical approaches to research management. If you've not seen it, do look at the Nuffield Council on Bioethics' 2014 report, *The Culture of Scientific Research in the UK: The findings of a series of engagement activities*.

Several funders have published new or revised policies on bullying and harassment, there are updated Concordats relating to researchers' careers and research integrity, and there is some encouragement (but perhaps not enough) for more responsible research performance evaluation. These are necessary concerns, with interest from Parliament, but it is worrying that institutions and individuals need to be cajoled – or forced – into appropriate practices.

I have just attended the annual meeting of ARMA's sister society, SRA International. As on previous occasions, I was struck by the level of concentration on 'compliance' by US institutions. Not so much the achievement of good practice, as the meeting of specific rules.

There is a significant amount of time and effort dedicated to this, rather than supporting good research and its outcome. We need to make sure we do not fall into the same trap.

Seizing the day

The current hot topic was foreign influence in research, driven by US government policies (the T-word). The main issues relate to intellectual property, sharing of confidential information and failure to disclose receipt of resources. The view was that institutions need to balance their oversight – related to foreign influence – with their commitments to academic freedom, open science, and global engagement.

Similar balances do also apply to us, including the need to have more active conflict of interest disclosure and management. While noting this, I would also observe that the topic of export control has had much greater prominence in the US than it has in the UK, even though we have similar legislation, dating back to 2004.

Although 'foreign influence' is exercising our US colleagues, does it provide an opportunity for UK researchers? How well placed are we to work across national boundaries with non-traditional funders and customers (perhaps more the latter than the former)? In the research management sphere, one makes one's own opportunities, and the development and maintenance of relationships is key, as are having an appropriate approach to risk management and a flexibility of attitude and mechanism. Research managers perhaps have something to learn from our development colleagues about stewarding relationships.

So, is it all doom and gloom? No. But the research policy and funding environment will continue to be volatile, requiring institutions, researchers and those who support them to be agile. All of us have a role to play in creating a productive and supportive research environment. What's yours?

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