



House of Commons
Science and Technology
Committee

Director General of the Research Councils: Introductory Hearing

Ninth Report of Session 2003–04

*Report, together with formal minutes, oral and
written evidence*

*Ordered by The House of Commons
to be printed 30 June 2004*

HC 577
Published on 5 July 2004
by authority of the House of Commons
London: The Stationery Office Limited
£6.00

The Science and Technology Committee

The Science and Technology Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Office of Science and Technology and its associated public bodies

Current membership

Dr Ian Gibson MP (*Labour, Norwich North*) (Chairman)
Paul Farrelly MP (*Labour, Newcastle-under-Lyme*)
Dr Evan Harris MP (*Liberal Democrat, Oxford West & Abingdon*)
Mr Tom Harris MP (*Labour, Glasgow Cathcart*)
Dr Brian Iddon MP (*Labour, Bolton South East*)
Mr Robert Key MP (*Conservative, Salisbury*)
Mr Tony McWalter MP (*Labour, Hemel Hempstead*)
Dr Andrew Murrison MP (*Conservative, Westbury*)
Geraldine Smith MP (*Labour, Morecambe and Lunesdale*)
Bob Spink MP (*Conservative, Castle Point*)
Dr Desmond Turner MP (*Labour, Brighton Kemptown*)

Powers

The Committee is one of the departmental select Committees, the powers of which are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No.152. These are available on the Internet via www.parliament.uk

Publications

The Reports and evidence of the Committee are published by The Stationery Office by Order of the House. All publications of the Committee (including press notices) are on the Internet at www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_committees/science_and_technology_committee.cfm. A list of Reports from the Committee in the present Parliament is included at the back of this volume.

Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are, Chris Shaw (Clerk), Emily Commander (Second Clerk), Alun Roberts (Committee Specialist); Hayaatun Sillem (Committee Specialist), Ana Ferreira (Committee Assistant); Robert Long (Senior Office Clerk), and Christine McGrane (Committee Secretary)

Contacts

All correspondence should be addressed to the Clerk of the Science and Technology Committee, Committee Office, 7 Millbank, London SW1P 3JA. The telephone number for general inquiries is: 020 7219 2793; the Committee's e-mail address is: scitechcom@parliament.uk

Contents

Report	<i>Page</i>
Introduction	3
Suitability	3
Relationship with the Research Councils	4
Job Title	4
Remit of the DGRC	5
Science in Society	6
Interdisciplinary Research	6
Ten –Year Investment Framework for Science and Innovation	7
Conclusion	7
Conclusions and recommendations	8
Report	3
Formal Minutes	10
Witnesses	11
Written Evidence	11

Report

Introduction

1. At the beginning of the Parliament we undertook, as one of our core tasks, “To scrutinise major appointments made by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry” within our remit. This is in accordance with one of the Liaison Committee’s core tasks for Select Committees.¹ We envisaged that this would take the form of a single evidence session with new incumbents to be held within their first few months of office. The sessions are intended to be analogous to the Congressional confirmation hearings in the United States, although we have no power to ratify or veto any appointment. Our purpose is to satisfy Parliament that the post has been filled with someone of sufficient calibre, establish the views and principles that he or she brings to the job, alert the incumbent to our interests and concerns, and heighten awareness of our role in scrutinising each individual’s performance and that of their divisions or organisations.

2. So far we have held five such sessions, with Professor Ian Diamond, Chief Executive of the Economic and Social Research Council; Mr David Hughes, Director General of Innovation at the Department of Trade and Industry; Professor Colin Blakemore, Chief Executive of the Medical Research Council²; and Professor Sir Alan Wilson, Director General for Higher Education at the Department for Education and Skills³. On 12 May 2004, the Committee held an introductory hearing with Professor Sir Keith O’Nions, Director General of the Research Councils (DGRC). The transcript of the session is published with this report, together with a written statement submitted by Sir Keith in advance of the session.

Suitability

3. Sir Keith took up the post of DGRC at the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) in January 2004. Prior to this, he spent four years as Chief Scientific Adviser to the Ministry of Defence (MoD). In contrast to his predecessors, who were both industrialists, Sir Keith has a background in academia, having previously held the position of Head of the Department of Earth Sciences at the University of Cambridge as well as posts at the Universities of Oxford and Columbia. Sir Keith explained to us that for the first approximately six months of his appointment he is dividing his time between the MoD and DTI, with only one day each week officially allocated to his DGRC role. **We believe that Sir Keith’s experience, both in academia and at the MoD, should equip him well for his duties as DGRC and note that his appointment has been favourably received by many in the science community. However, we are disappointed that Sir Keith has not yet been able to fully commit to his new post. It is essential that the DGRC plays a full role in the development of the ten–year framework for science and investment and negotiations for the spending review. We are concerned that this is not possible whilst the DGRC is**

1 First Report of the Liaison Committee, Session 2002–03, *Annual Report for 2002*, HC 558, para 13

2 Second Report of the Science and Technology Committee, Session 2003–04, *Chief Executive of the Medical Research Council: Introductory Hearing* (HC 55)

3 Seventh Report of the Science and Technology Committee, Session 2003–04, *Director General for Higher Education: Introductory Hearing* (HC 461)

only in post for one day each week. We hope that in future the OST will ensure that appointments for major posts are ready to assume their positions as soon as the post becomes vacant.

Relationship with the Research Councils

4. It is clear from the memorandum submitted by Sir Keith that he sees a need to review the relationship of the DGRC with the Research Councils. Sir Keith stated that he was “in discussions with the Chief Executives of the Research Councils about how to ensure that [the] DGRC is fully engaged in strategic matters in a way that is consistent with RCUK being able to offer independent advice to the Government and where, as Executive Non Departmental Public Bodies, responsibility for the day-to-day management of the Councils rests with the Chief Executives”.⁴

5. On 5 May 2004, the DGRC was invited to give evidence to the Committee as part of its inquiry into scientific publications, with the intention that he should speak on behalf of the Research Councils. However, neither he nor RCUK were content with this arrangement and RCUK consequently sent a separate representative to the session. This denotes a significant departure from Sir Keith’s predecessors’ interpretation of the job. Indeed, Sir John Taylor, his immediate predecessor, regularly appeared before the Committee on behalf of the Research Councils. Sir Keith described this deviation from past procedure as a “shift that becomes logical as RCUK matures and finds its feet in an effective way”.⁵

6. Sir Keith also explained that he believed that he “must not get involved in what is the rightful responsibility and proper accountability of the heads of the Research Councils, in the day-to-day running of their business and looking at cross-council issues”.⁶ **We welcome Sir Keith’s recognition of the need to respect the independence of the Research Councils granted by their Royal Charters. We also endorse his view that RCUK strategy group meetings should not become mired in discussions over detail. However, Sir Keith’s unwillingness to appear before the Committee on behalf of RCUK and to address cross-council issues signifies a notable departure from his predecessors’ interpretation of the role. If the DGRC cannot speak on behalf of the Research Councils, there is an obvious need to clarify the nature of his job, as well as to establish who should speak on behalf of RCUK. It is vital that the relationship between the DGRC and RCUK is clearly defined. We welcome the fact that Sir Keith appears to recognise this and look forward to exploring this issue further during our forthcoming scrutiny of RCUK.**

Job Title

7. Sir Keith stated in written evidence that his primary role was “advising the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on the UK Science Budget”.⁷ This differs quite substantially from the role that his title, Director General of the Research Councils, implies. When

4 Ev 10

5 Q 8

6 Q 8

7 Ev 10

questioned on whether he saw himself as an advocate of the science community or an implementer of Government strategy, Sir Keith told us “It has to be both. Clearly, I am an advocate of strategy. My job description is that I am responsible to the Secretary of State for the strategy for the science budget, and on that basis I view it as my job to be collating, feeding in and representing the views of RCUK – that is a very large part of the community – but also, more widely reflecting the views of the community through the Royal Society, the Royal Academy of Engineering and elsewhere”.⁸

8. In responding to the suggestion that this description of his role did not tally with his job title, Sir Keith remarked: “I did not invent the name myself. I absolutely respect your view. If you have recommendations to make I think that is all to the good [...] I look forward to your view”.⁹ **We believe that the title DGRC is misleading and are pleased that Sir Keith is receptive to finding an alternative title that more accurately reflects his role. We suggest that ‘Director General of the Research Base’ better indicates the scope of his responsibilities.**

Remit of the DGRC

9. At present, the Chief Scientific Adviser to the Government (CSA), fulfils a dual role combining a coordination and advisory function with the post of Head of the OST. The current CSA, Professor Sir David King, has been active in promoting cross-Government coordination, and providing advice to the Prime Minister and Cabinet, on matters relating to science and technology. We have been impressed by Sir David’s achievements in these areas but are not convinced that this important advisory role is complemented by the CSA’s responsibilities as Head of the OST. We are, moreover, concerned that the latter obligation could impede the CSA’s ability to operate as an independent and high-level advocate of science across Government.

10. Furthermore, the current organisational structure in the OST does not clearly convey the seniority of the DGRC’s position. We understand that in practice the DGRC and CSA both represent the OST within DTI, depending on whether the subject matter concerns international and cross-Government, or UK science base, issues. It is therefore misleading to apply the title ‘Head of the OST’ to the CSA: in effect, this function is fulfilled by the CSA *and* the DGRC.

11. In addition, with the emergence of RCUK the role of the DGRC has evolved significantly from its initial incarnation and, as noted above, Sir Keith has already signalled his intention to take a more ‘hands-off’ approach to interaction with the Research Councils. **We therefore recommend that Government revisit the responsibilities allocated to the DGRC and CSA to reflect better the priorities now associated with these posts. In particular, the designation of the CSA as Head of the OST is confusing and underplays the significance of the DGRC’s role. At present, it is difficult for an observer to understand the reporting lines and responsibilities of the senior management in the OST. We believe that the OST should clarify these relationships, and announce the resulting organisational structure.**

8 Q 19

9 Q 15

Science in Society

12. In its Departmental Report 2004, DTI notes that it “must encourage greater public engagement with science and a dialogue that leads to an improved mutual understanding between scientists, policy makers and the public. This is an area that has assumed an increasing importance as a result of issues such as BSE, Genetically Modified (GM) food and MMR”.¹⁰ The Research Councils currently carry out separate public engagement activities, with spend on these activities representing only a small proportion of their total budgets.

13. We were encouraged to hear Sir Keith raise the question of whether the various activities concerning public engagement with science and technology are “joined up in a coherent way such that all these people that have a role to play are focused on the same issue, or are we playing a whole load of parallel games, most of which are having rather limited effect?”.¹¹ We consider this to be an apposite question that has not yet been answered. Sir Keith told us “This is an area where I have to give some effort, and I hope, if we meet in twelve months’ time, there is a better story to tell”.¹² **We believe that public engagement with science and technology is an issue of the utmost importance and are disappointed that the OST has taken so long to implement the recommendations of the British Association report on Science in Society¹³. We hope that Sir Keith’s involvement will give fresh impetus to efforts in this area and look forward to Sir Keith’s return in a year’s time to report on the progress he has made.**

Interdisciplinary Research

14. The Committee’s 2003 OST scrutiny report notes that “some differences in policies and grant schemes [between the Research Councils] are completely unnecessary. These make comparisons between Councils difficult and, more seriously, could create obstacles to interdisciplinary research”.¹⁴ The Committee has also heard evidence in its inquiry into the use of science in UK international development policy that disparities in the policies of the various Research Councils are hindering research in this area.

15. Sir Keith commented that he thought that the Research Councils already had “both the machinery and the incentive”¹⁵ to support interdisciplinary research but conceded that “it will always be one of these things that you will always have to work quite hard at”.¹⁶ He also expressed the view that the Research Councils “must have a part to play”¹⁷ in funding research for international development. **We are pleased that Sir Keith intends to work hard at improving funding arrangements for interdisciplinary research. We believe that despite the progress already made towards this end by the Research Councils,**

10 Department of Trade and Industry, *Departmental Report 2004*, Cm 6216, p 82

11 Q 40

12 Q 44

13 *Science in Society*, British Association, November 2002

14 Fourth Report of the Science and Technology Committee, Session 2003–04, *The Office of Science and Technology: Scrutiny Report 2003* (HC 316), para 36

15 Q 33

16 Q 33

17 Q 50

further attention needs to be given to the ability of the Research Councils to handle proposals for interdisciplinary research. We also welcome Sir Keith's recognition of the Research Councils' role in supporting research for international development and hope that this will translate into greater consistency between the policies of the various Research Councils.

Ten –Year Investment Framework for Science and Innovation

16. In a speech on 26 January 2004 the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced that a ten-year investment framework for science and innovation would be a central feature of the 2004 spending review. A consultation on the investment framework was launched on 16 March and concluded on 30 April 2004. Sir Keith indicated that he was heavily involved with the development of this strategy and commented that the Treasury had “reached out in quite an impressive way”.¹⁸ Sir Keith also accepted that despite the fact that there had been “a very healthy response”¹⁹ to the consultation, the short consultation period could have disadvantaged contributors who lacked the capacity to generate rapid responses. **We are encouraged by Sir Keith's conviction that the Treasury has successfully engaged with the scientific community in developing this framework and are pleased that he acknowledges the potential difficulties arising from the short consultation period. We intend to undertake a detailed examination of the ten-year framework in a forthcoming inquiry.**

Conclusion

17. We welcome the appointment of Sir Keith to the post of DGRC and are confident that he possesses the requisite skills and experience to enable him to fulfil this role effectively. It is, however, clear that the duties undertaken by Sir Keith are significantly different to those that his title, Director General of the Research Councils, suggests and therefore propose that an alternative job title be identified. Furthermore, we believe that it would be timely to revisit the distribution of responsibilities between the CSA and the DGRC in view of the evolution of the priorities associated with these positions over recent years. We look forward to further meetings with Sir Keith in the coming months.

18 Q 25

19 Q 27

Conclusions and recommendations

1. We believe that Sir Keith's experience, both in academia and at the MoD, should equip him well for his duties as DGRC and note that his appointment has been favourably received by many in the science community. However, we are disappointed that Sir Keith has not yet been able to fully commit to his new post. It is essential that the DGRC plays a full role in the development of the ten-year framework for science and investment and negotiations for the spending review. We are concerned that this is not possible whilst the DGRC is only in post for one day each week. We hope that in future the OST will ensure that appointments for major posts are ready to assume their positions as soon as the post becomes vacant. (Paragraph 3)
2. We welcome Sir Keith's recognition of the need to respect the independence of the Research Councils granted by their Royal Charters. We also endorse his view that RCUK strategy group meetings should not become mired in discussions over detail. However, Sir Keith's unwillingness to appear before the Committee on behalf of RCUK and to address cross-council issues signifies a notable departure from his predecessors' interpretation of the role. If the DGRC cannot speak on behalf of the Research Councils, there is an obvious need to clarify the nature of his job, as well as to establish who should speak on behalf of RCUK. It is vital that the relationship between the DGRC and RCUK is clearly defined. We welcome the fact that Sir Keith appears to recognise this and look forward to exploring this issue further during our forthcoming scrutiny of RCUK. (Paragraph 6)
3. We believe that the title DGRC is misleading and are pleased that Sir Keith is receptive to finding an alternative title that more accurately reflects his role. We suggest that 'Director General of the Research Base' better indicates the scope of his responsibilities. (Paragraph 8)
4. We therefore recommend that Government revisit the responsibilities allocated to the DGRC and CSA to reflect better the priorities now associated with these posts. In particular, the designation of the CSA as Head of the OST is confusing and underplays the significance of the DGRC's role. At present, it is difficult for an observer to understand the reporting lines and responsibilities of the senior management in the OST. We believe that the OST should clarify these relationships, and announce the resulting organisational structure. (Paragraph 11)
5. We believe that public engagement with science and technology is an issue of the utmost importance and are disappointed that the OST has taken so long to implement the recommendations of the British Association report on Science in Society. We hope that Sir Keith's involvement will give fresh impetus to efforts in this area and look forward to Sir Keith's return in a year's time to report on the progress he has made. (Paragraph 13)
6. We are pleased that Sir Keith intends to work hard at improving funding arrangements for interdisciplinary research. We believe that despite the progress already made towards this end by the Research Councils, further attention needs to

be given to the ability of the Research Councils to handle proposals for interdisciplinary research. We also welcome Sir Keith's recognition of the Research Councils' role in supporting research for international development and hope that this will translate into greater consistency between the policies of the various Research Councils. (Paragraph 15)

7. We are encouraged by Sir Keith's conviction that the Treasury has successfully engaged with the scientific community in developing this framework and are pleased that he acknowledges the potential difficulties arising from the short consultation period. We intend to undertake a detailed examination of the ten-year framework in a forthcoming inquiry. (Paragraph 16)

Formal Minutes

Wednesday 30 June 2004

Members present:
Dr Ian Gibson, in the Chair

Dr Evan Harris
Mr Tony McWalter

Geraldine Smith
Bob Spink

The Committee deliberated.

Draft Report (Director General of the Research Councils: Introductory Hearing), proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 17 read and agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Ninth Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chairman do make the Report to the House.

[Adjourned till Monday 5 July at Three o'clock.]

Witnesses

Wednesday 12 May 2004

Page

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions, Director General of the Research Councils

Ev 1

Written Evidence

1 Professor Sir Keith O’Nions

Ev 10

Reports from the Science and Technology Committee since 2001

Session 2003-04

First Report	Annual Report 2003	HC 169
Second Report	Chief Executive of the Medical Research Council: Introductory Hearing (<i>Reply HC 629</i>)	HC 55
Third Report	The Work of the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (<i>Reply HC 526</i>)	HC 6
Fourth Report	Office of Science and Technology: Scrutiny Report 2003 (<i>Reply HC 588</i>)	HC 316
Fifth Report	<i>Too Little too late?</i> Government Investment in Nanotechnology (<i>Reply HC 650</i>)	HC 56
Sixth Report	Within REACH: the EU's new chemicals strategy	HC 172
Seventh Report	Director General for Higher Education: Introductory Hearing	HC 461
Eighth Report	The Work of the Council for the Central Laboratory of the Research Councils	HC 462

Session 2002-03

First Report	The Work of the Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council (<i>Reply HC 507</i>)	HC 161
Second Report	Annual Report 2002	HC 260
Third Report	The Work of the Medical Research Council (<i>Reply Cm 5834</i>)	HC 132
Fourth Report	Towards a Non-Carbon Fuel Economy: Research, Development and Demonstration (<i>Reply HC 745</i>)	HC 55
Fifth Report	The Work of the Natural Environment Research Council (<i>Reply HC 1161</i>)	HC 674
Sixth Report	UK Science and Europe: Value for Money? (<i>Reply HC 1162</i>)	HC 386
Seventh Report	Light Pollution and Astronomy (<i>Reply HC 127, 2003-04</i>)	HC 747
Eighth Report	The Scientific Response to Terrorism (<i>Reply Cm 6108</i>)	HC 415
Ninth Report	The Work of the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (<i>Reply HC 169, 2003-04</i>)	HC 936

Session 2001-02

First Report	Cancer Research – A Follow-Up (<i>Reply Cm 5532</i>)	HC 444
Second Report	The Research Assessment Exercise (<i>Reply HC 995</i>)	HC 507
Third Report	Science Education from 14 to 19 (<i>Reply HC 1204</i>)	HC 508
Fourth Report	Developments in Human Genetics and Embryology (<i>Reply Cm 5693</i>)	HC 791
Fifth Report	Government Funding of the Scientific Learned Societies (<i>Reply HC 53</i>)	HC 774
Sixth Report	National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts: A Follow-Up (<i>Reply HC 276</i>)	HC 1064
Seventh Report	The Office of Science and Technology: Scrutiny Report 2002 (<i>Reply HC 293</i>)	HC 860
Eighth Report	Short-Term Research Contracts in Science and Engineering (<i>Reply HC 442</i>)	HC 1046

Oral evidence

Taken before the Science and Technology Committee

on Wednesday 12 May 2004

Members present

Dr Ian Gibson, in the Chair

Dr Evan Harris
Mr Robert Key
Mr Tony McWalter

Bob Spink
Dr Desmond Turner

Witness: Professor Sir Keith O’Nions, Director General of the Research Councils, examined.

Q1 Chairman: Sir Keith, welcome to your weekly visit.

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: Thank you.

Q2 Chairman: Thank you for coming again: a different subject but more wide-ranging this time. Could I start by asking you this question: the position you have taken up, of DGRC, it seems you are doing one day a week. John Taylor did it seven days a week, I seem to remember. Are you just that more efficient?

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: I will be doing it eight days fairly soon.

Q3 Chairman: A great record.

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: Would you like me to comment—

Q4 Chairman: Yes, just say how you are going to plan, when it starts, and so on.

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: I started the DGRC job at the beginning of January on a part-time basis. All my employment in formal terms is still as Chief Scientific Advisor to the Ministry of Defence. The understanding between the two departments is that around a day a week would be the contribution in the first few months, with agreed priorities with the permanent secretary and, indeed, ministers, in what I would emphasise, at the DTI. The way it has panned out, I have tried to spend a part of each day of the week at the DTI. In fact, I have been able to put rather more time in there than a day a week. Having an effective private office there and in the MOD and rather a short walk between the two, it has worked out reasonably well. My end date at the Ministry of Defence is July 9 and then I will be full time in the DTI. In the DTI I have obviously had to prioritise quite hard, in agreement with ministers and the permanent secretary, and I have really focused quite hard on the spending review, on RCUK, Funders’ Forum, 10-year strategy and those issues, and have devoted less time to broader responsibilities that I will have in the DTI, outside of the OST part, and obviously we will be devoting a full part to those from the summer. That is the situation.

Q5 Chairman: Thank you very much. Everybody has trepidation in any new position. What is yours, or are yours, in terms of, for example, interaction with industry and so on, from your background?

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: I think on the industry side of it I do not have trepidation. The four and a half years I have been in defence has been quite a phenomenal experience by any standards, with a great deal of interaction with industry and not just the defence industry. I think, on that side, I am in immeasurably better shape than I would have been straight out of the academic world. I would not say I have trepidation but I think the biggest challenge is that there are many players involved in science and science education. We have the DTI/OST and the interface between OST and the innovation side of DTI is obviously something that needs to be as coherent as possible. We then have the relationship with DfES and of course the Welsh and Scottish equivalents and the large charities and the RDAs, all of whom are significant players in this enterprise that will be expressed more fully in the 10 year strategy. So I think quite a big challenge is to play one’s full part in bringing together a coherent approach to these in the future.

Chairman: You sound like Sven Eriksson talking about the England football team, with all the injuries and problems.

Q6 Mr Key: Sir Keith, I am very keen to pursue this apparent change of your function from your predecessors. You wrote to us to say, “I am currently in discussions with the Chief Executives of the Research Councils about how to ensure that DGRC is fully engaged in strategic matters in a way that is consistent with RCUK being able to offer independent advice to the Government . . .” Could you explain why you see your role as different from the role of your predecessors and who thought that it should be different?

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: The discussions that I have been having with the Chief Executives of the Research Councils and RCUK appeared in some detail in *Research Fortnight* and we have also written to you and it is a fairly accurate description. Let me start up by saying that RCUK, in my view, has been a very considerable success and is going from strength to strength and we are very fortunate in

12 May 2004 Professor Sir Keith O’Nions

having Chief Executives of the Research Councils that are working well together, want to work well together and I am confident about their future. My introduction to RCUK has been a very constructive one with the members of RCUK, and I think it is off to an excellent start. The sorts of discussions which we have had, which, as I say, are exposed in *Research Fortnight* have been quite informal in part and—

Q7 Chairman: You are not on the board of *Research Fortnight*, you do not have to declare an interest. I notice they are here. You are embarrassing them.

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: I will move swiftly on. I am sorry, I have lost my thread.

Q8 Chairman: RCUK.

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: I think the important thing as RCUK develops is that the person in my position, the DGRC, must not get involved in what is the rightful responsibility and proper accountability of the heads of the Research Councils, in the day-to-day running of their business and looking at cross-council issues and efficiencies. I think it is very important to establish that, we are in complete agreement that I need to have a relationship at the strategic level, which is very effective, and particularly must be very effective as we move into the future on a 10-year strategy. That is the nature of the discussion. There is no firm conclusion. The review that is taking place of RCUK by Phil Ruffles and his team is likely to express a view on that. Nothing is finalised but those are the sort of grown-up discussions that have been taking place. Whether it is a real policy shift with the past I cannot really say, but I think it is probably a shift that becomes logical as RCUK matures and finds its feet in an effective way.

Q9 Mr Key: But even though you are Director General of the Research Councils you have decided you should not speak on their behalf. Why?

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: I do not think I have formally said I would not speak on their behalf. I think I must have a voice, given that I have a duty to the Secretary of State to set strategies and to advise on resources across individual Research Councils and also to set objectives for the Research Councils. That is the core of my responsibility to the Secretary of State. I think it is inevitable we should be talking in a coherent way on strategic issues, but in terms of day-to-day management of Research Council processes, they have their independent charters, their councils and so on. If you mean talking on their behalf in that day-to-day management, and running their business within the confines of their charters, then I would not be expected to be almost interfering at that level.

Mr Key: I think there is a difference, with respect, between interfering in the day-to-day running of the Research Councils and not speaking for them. On 5 May, when you gave evidence to this Committee, it was intended that you should speak on behalf of the Research Councils, but neither you nor they

were content with the arrangement so they sent a separate person to speak on their behalf when you are the Director General. Why?

Q10 Chairman: You are being challenged.

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: I was detecting a slight challenge there. This goes back to our discussions on open access, where I think you were fully expecting me to be representing the Department of Trade and Industry in all respects. I was representing the view of OST and giving you sight of conversations broadly that were going on in OST/DTI of an emerging policy in this regard. I think where you showed some frustration that on things like monopolies and competition policy I quite clearly felt I was not in a position to give you valuable advice on that. So I did not expect to be here with total respect in a position to go into those areas, but I was in a position to give you, I think, a clear view of where emerging policy was in DTI/OST and our discussions with the minister.

Q11 Mr Key: I just fear this is all muddying the water. If you are called the Director General of the Research Councils, is there not a case for actually changing that name or not calling yourself the Director General of the Research Councils any more?

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: I am not too bothered about the details of that. I think what really matters is the substance of the job.

Q12 Mr Key: That is all right then.

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: The substance of the job I think is very clear. The role and responsibilities I have to the Secretary of State are absolutely clear. We are not in the business of creating a single, unified Research Council of which I sit at the head. The facts are we have seven Research Councils, and another, the Arts and Humanities Board, is about to join, each with their charter and each with their remit as to how to run their business. So I do not think anything is changing. If you feel that DGRC is not the right title then I absolutely respect your view.

Q13 Chairman: Would you accept a title from us?

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: What is on offer, sir?

Q14 Chairman: I know what I would call you but we—

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: I know, but it is going on the record.

Chairman: There are some of us around—as one of my colleagues said—who think you could be a fine Tsar, I guess.

Q15 Mr Key: I think we are going to have to come back to this. I think you would probably wish to yourself as things develop, because it really is very unsatisfactory: your job description is in the public domain, it is quite clear what you are meant to do but it seems the title that you have is not reflecting the job you perceive you should be doing.

12 May 2004 Professor Sir Keith O’Nions

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: As I say, I did not invent the name myself. I absolutely respect your view. If you have recommendations to make I think that is all to the good. Within the DTI construct, people that have jobs at my sort of responsibility and accountability are all director generals and so, I suppose, it has simplicity. I look forward to your view.

Q16 Chairman: This is all, surely, fine stuff—what your title is—but your predecessor spoke for the RCUK. Why can you not? Who has changed that remit?

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: It has not changed at the moment, I am still chairing RCUK.

Q17 Chairman: But you are not speaking for them.

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: I will speak on behalf of decisions that are made under my Chairmanship of the RCUK. I think I have been quite clear, in that I have been discussing whether the frequency with which I chair RCUK and some of the agenda items that are frequently on the agenda are more properly part of their day-to-day business and not the more strategic issues.

Q18 Mr McWalter: We do not know whether you are an advocate of the science community to Government or whether you are an implementer of government strategy to the science community.

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: Both.

Q19 Mr McWalter: Which of those roles predominates?

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: It has to be both. Clearly, I am an advocate of strategy. My job description is that I am responsible to the Secretary of State for the strategy for the science budget, and on that basis I view it as my job to be collating, feeding in and representing the views of RCUK—that is a very large part of the community—but, also, more widely reflecting the views of the community through the Royal Society, the Royal Academy of Engineering and elsewhere. So it is a two-way process and in the 10-year strategy, I think, that comes to the fore. Myself and several others are very much involved in the—

Chairman: We will come to that in a minute.

Dr Turner: Sir Keith, you clearly want to see quite a wide remit in giving independent advice to the Government. Do you see any overlap between what you are seeking to do and the role of the Government’s Chief Scientific Adviser? Are you stepping on his toes?

Q20 Chairman: Or any other part of his anatomy!

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: Not deliberately. Would you mind if I just give you a very brief perspective from the job I am doing at the moment? It will be brief. I was advised that the best answers are long answers, but I will be short.

Q21 Mr Key: Very sound advice, which I hope you will not follow, Sir Keith!

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: As the Chief Scientific Adviser for Defence I have two jobs: one is responsibility for scientific advice, broadly on Defence, to the Secretary of State and being ultimately responsible for that. There is an analogy between that and what Sir David King has in responsibility to the Prime Minister and Cabinet, although formally he can overlap into defence should he choose. However, in Defence I also hold the budget for science and technology, and it is about a £450 million budget, and I have to deliver a research programme that meets the corporate needs of Defence. How I see the job in the non-Defence world is that there is still a very big advisory role for the non-defence area and there is a much more complicated job and a much bigger job of delivering the science budget and using it to best effect on behalf of the Secretary of State. In my sense there are two jobs there. Dave King is primarily doing the advisory role and my job is primarily managing the research budget. Inevitably things butt up and overlap and while I can say that is extremely healthy, the relationship I have with Dave King is absolutely first-class and I think in my tenure of this position and his it will be a completely constructive relationship. I can use words like “synergy” and all that sort of thing, but I think it will be a very constructive relationship and there really are two jobs there.

Q22 Mr McWalter: When did you first hear about the Treasury’s 10-year investment framework for science innovation? Was it a surprise to you?

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: Yes, it was. The part that was a surprise was not the emphasis that the Chancellor gave to innovation, sustaining the science base and a vision for science, simply because the Lambert Report and the DTI Innovation Report had somehow foreshadowed and set the scene for that; I think the surprise to me, and exceedingly welcome, was to propose a 10-year strategy for this, because I think this takes investment in science in this country into a territory where it has never been before—or has not been in my career—which is extremely exciting. The notion of having this sufficiently high profile and high priority within government to be establishing a 10-year strategic framework with rather clear goals, which gives a predictability and purpose to the community, I think, will make Britain potentially a better place to do science, a more attractive place to do science, and I think we will get a better return from it. So that was a surprise, and an exceedingly welcome one; I think these are potentially very exciting times.

Q23 Mr McWalter: How much control does the Treasury have over the direction of science policy?

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: They obviously have the money. Do you mean within the 10-year framework or in general? Within the 10-year framework the Treasury have, obviously, quite a strong lead, but the strategy is being developed jointly between DTI and the Department for Education and Skills and OST. I am just flicking through the page to make sure I get the membership

12 May 2004 Professor Sir Keith O’Nions

right, but I will do it from memory. There is a group that is led by Paul Boateng that is developing this strategy, and the membership of his group is Lord Sainsbury, Sir David King, myself, Sir Alan Wilson from Education and David Hughes from the innovation side of the DTI. So I think it is representing not all the players, obviously, but it has many of the key players. So I think it should end up being a pretty joined-up affair, although the Chair of it is from the Treasury, and that seems to me quite appropriate given that one would expect that emerging strategy to be reflected in the SR004-7.

Q24 Mr McWalter: Long-term investment in science and engineering technology is an obvious strategy. Why did the OST not come up with it first? We had an inquiry into wave and tidal power, for instance, where we made all sorts of suggestions about the long-term investment strategy, which did not seem to get taken up.

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: Can I immediately apologise inasmuch as I do not have the whole history of what the OST has proposed on this, and so on. If you sense that I should give you advice and a note on what OST has proposed over the years and so on, I am very happy to do that but, at the moment, I have not looked back over the sort of proposals that have been made since the inception of the OST.

Q25 Mr McWalter: Is the Treasury replete with front-rank scientists who really understand how the money should best be spent?

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: I will try and give a courteous answer to that. I think the Treasury has full access to areas where there is a great deal of scientific expertise. I would, as a pretty committed scientist, genuinely say it has gone the extra mile to interact with them and in setting up the committee under Paul Boateng, I would say, is representing them very well. The various meetings that the Chancellor has had have represented the scientific societies, the higher education funding councils, those parts of government which are science-intensive and responsible for delivering it, the business community and the RDAs, so I think they have reached out in quite an impressive way. I make that statement as a non-Treasury person.

Q26 Mr McWalter: A six-week consultation period suggests there may be a tendency to over-simplification. Do you think that is true?

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: Because of the shortness of the six weeks?

Q27 Mr McWalter: Yes.

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: It is a short period of time, I agree. A lot of information is coming in. In preparation for this meeting today I collated some of the responses that David King and myself have solicited on the basis of a joint letter. Just to give you a flavour for what it has accessed, we have had responses from nearly all the people on the new Council of Science and Technology that has been set up; the chief scientific advisers of the various

government departments have all responded pretty full; we have responses from all the research council heads and RCUK; we have responses from the Royal Society and other key contacts and officials between DTI, OST and the Treasury are collating the broad sense of responses coming in. It looks like a very healthy response. I do not have yet an analysis—I cannot even give you the general thrust of it—but I think there has been a good, healthy response. Could we have had more time? You can always have more time. They have responded impressively.

Q28 Mr McWalter: Is there a response there from the Department for International Development, for instance, who we would have liked to have responded to this, but we suspect may not have done so?

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: Again, can I say I have not personally seen one but I have not personally gone through every part of that. I do not know whether any of my colleagues behind me are going to tell me yes or no, but if not perhaps I could give you—

Chairman: They are looking bemused!

Q29 Mr McWalter: The reason for asking the question is that those who have got the capacity possibly to address issues where there has been insufficient investment or, perhaps, priorities which have not been properly addressed may well not have had the opportunity to do anything in the six-week period, whereas those that are in the system, of course, can fire off at you what they would like to see.

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: A very valid point. Can I give you advice on it? I do not know whether we have received an input from DFID but I accept your point that such an input would be a very useful thing to have, given their remit.

Chairman: There may be some chasing to do.

Q30 Dr Turner: The OST has been conducting a review of Research Councils UK. Can you tell us what themes are emerging from that review and what conclusions the report is likely to come to?

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: I cannot tell you an enormous amount about it other than that the agreement was that a group set up under Phil Ruffles is looking at this. There was a requirement in the quinquennial review process to have a two-year look at RCUK. They have a broad remit and can comment on what they wish. I will not go through the list of members of it, unless you want them, but they involve academics, industrial people and Roger McClure from SHEFC, so it is a good group. I have met with Phil Ruffles, and, I believe, Lord Sainsbury and David King have as well and they have been gathering information over the last few weeks. Their next meeting, I recall, is on May 24 when I will meet the whole group for the first time, and then I will certainly get a view of their emerging conclusions. My sense from just very preliminary and early discussions is that they are quite impressed, I think, with what RCUK have done (there may be many more things to emerge). I believe they have taken an

12 May 2004 Professor Sir Keith O’Nions

interest in and probably will comment on the issue we started with on my relationship with RCUK and how that should be properly positioned for best effect, but on May 24 I can tell you a lot more.

Q31 Dr Turner: How successful do you think the harmonisation process between research councils has been so far? Can you give us some evidence of the benefits that have actually emerged from the creation of RCUK and harmonisation?

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: I think we are about two years in to RCUK. As I said early on, I think we are fortunate in having such a good group of heads of research councils. I think it is going from strength to strength, and if I had to put my finger on a few things that it has achieved, what they have done on e-science, which is a strong, world-class cross-disciplinary programme, and the genomics issue are clear benefits of RCUK. In terms of what one sees in the outside world, perhaps more in terms of glossy brochures, I think their preparation of two recent brochures, one called *Synthesis of Strategies* and another called *Vision for Research* (both RCUK outputs) are very good indeed and have been well-received and, I can say, have provided quite a strong input to the tenor of the SR004 bid that the DTI has put into the Treasury. The last point I would alight on is that there is a strong willingness internally in RCUK, without any particular strong coercion of me, to look at back-office processes and efficiencies there. I think those are the sorts of thing that I could not conceive happening in quite such a smooth manner without RCUK. So you will probably deduce from that that I sense it has played a real and valuable role.

Q32 Dr Turner: The harmonisation process cannot possibly have gone without any hitches or problems. How co-operative have the research councils been? Have they all been co-operative or have some been guarding their territory?

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: I cannot comment, really, on before I started the job in January, but since January I have found them enormously co-operative uniformly across the piece, I would say. They have agreed in terms of back-office efficiencies on a 10 per cent reduction in the overhead costs of administering their research budgets. I will correct the numbers later if I am wrong but I believe they have agreed to go down from 3.75 per cent to 3.4 per cent, and that has not been a contentious move at all. So I am finding them really quite a delight to deal with—do not have the image of me standing there with a big stick. I think there is a very joined-up approach to this.

Q33 Dr Turner: Sir Keith, interdisciplinary research is very much on the increase. The response of the research councils towards this is clearly likely to be a problem area. Short of actually combining into one research council, what arrangements do you see the research councils undertaking, or should undertake, to make sure that interdisciplinary research is

properly supported and that projects do not fall down between the cracks between the research councils?

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: I think this is an extremely important point. Let me say that as far as I am concerned the notion of one research council is not on my radar screen or my agenda, because I think, however you structure the organisation, you will set up divisions or research councils which have remits, and before very long you will be looking at the activity that is actually falling between them—the stove-pipe response (?). It is extremely important. One of the prime functions of RCUK is to look at those issues and work together, and they are working much better than they were 10 or 15 years ago—I have already talked about e-science and genomics. So I think the structure is there to do it. In the objectives, I think that they will agree with me around the distribution of resources to the research councils and I think there will be clear, agreed objectives there. So I think they have both the machinery and the incentive. But I absolutely agree with you; I think it will always be one of these things that you always have to work quite hard at, because the problem will always be moving somewhat ahead of you.

Q34 Dr Turner: What does actually happen? When an application comes in which involves three or four different disciplines, in which, say, three research councils can be expected to have an input, what do you do to make sure that it is properly addressed by all the research councils that are potentially involved?

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: The detail of that argument should come from the research councils themselves, but I will give you my take on it. If there is a programme set up, such as an e-science programme, which is inherently interdisciplinary and set up to be such, and an application goes to that, then that is usually managed on behalf of the research councils by one of them, but it is set up in an inherently interdisciplinary manner. There I think the machinery is quite clear. If there is an area of interdisciplinary research which is not established in that way—this comes up in some areas that people, perhaps, have not anticipated or there are not many players in that field—and does include components of different research councils, then the machinery should be in place to give the responsibility of that to one of the research councils by cross-council discussion.

Q35 Dr Turner: Would you expect those research councils affected to contribute towards the funding of that project?

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: I think it depends on how much money it is. I have had experience with other systems, such as the National Science Foundation in the US, which is a large structure with divisions and faces exactly these sorts of problems, and I think the right response is that you must never take your eye off that ball; you have just got to keep

12 May 2004 Professor Sir Keith O’Nions

working at it because it will always be there and tomorrow’s interdisciplinary problem will not be where today’s is.

Q36 Dr Turner: Finally, I cannot think of any better example of interdisciplinary operation than the MRC. When is that going to move to Swindon? Is it going to move to Swindon?

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: I suppose other parts of government have a view on that. Obviously, there are discussions between the DTI and Lyons and DTI and Gershon, as there are with other government departments. Those Lyons-type issues—to use a crude phraseology—are a broader DTI matter, not a pure OST matter, but if I can just make a personal statement rather than a statement on behalf of the DTI. There are some strong points in favour in having communications in medical research that are rather centred and focused along the Euston Road; it is just a fact of life there is such a concentration there. That is a personal observation, not an agreed policy position, but I think there are some strong arguments for that. In terms of back-office processes, I think the location of that sort of thing in the modern world does not necessarily have to be coupled in the same way. That is probably as much as I should say on that.

Q37 Dr Turner: Can I change the topic completely now and talk about innovation and exploitation of research? Do you think it is appropriate for research councils to fund the early stages of commercialisation—in other words, fund the first part of the innovation process? Or should this be exclusively the responsibility of other bits of the DTI?

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: I am not trying to wriggle out of your question but we have to be fairly clear where this early part of the innovation process is, because currently through—at least in England—the HEIF structure this is funding innovation jointly with business and those sorts of networks, and so on, at quite significant levels. Once you actually get to the point where that piece of innovation needs investment to make it into a product or manufacturing or so on—at the moment, we expect that to be outside of that funding and I believe that is right—I think it is then that venture capital, RDA funding and other sorts of things should come into play, but it is a grey area.

Q38 Mr McWalter: I am a bit worried about your terminology there. You say, “Once you get to that point”—actually the problem is it is not a point, it is a temporarily protracted phase before it becomes absolutely clear that HEIF needs to be involved and it is the negotiation of that phase which gives us, as a Committee, considerable worries about how funding for that phase is managed. Is this something—I do not expect you to give an answer now—you are willing to take away and think about and come back to the Committee on?

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: More than that, I do not disagree with your analysis at all; I think it is actually a very important point. I suppose if I went

back to the Chairman’s first question—what am I daunted by (or whatever the language was)—I expressed the challenges around the connectivity between OST funding and the others, and really at the core of my thinking there the challenges are precisely in the area where you are. I really think there is a great deal of careful thinking and analysis to be done.

Q39 Dr Turner: So it will help dispense with the language of points? Will it not? That is a start.

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: I think you have a very important point. Am I prepared to go away and think about it? You bet, is the answer.

Q40 Chairman: Just recently, this week, GM technology—as far as plants are concerned, that is—slumped further into the ground. That takes us to the issue of public engagement with science. What are your views on that? Are research councils in cloud cuckoo land? Are they playing at it? What do you feel needs to be done?

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: I think it is right that OST took on some of these responsibilities following some of the things that happened with COPUS, and so on. I think there is an argument that there should be involvement in this issue in all sorts of areas: the research councils, OST, Royal Society, Royal Institution, and so on. I think where your question is headed, and perhaps my own thoughts are residing, is: is this joined up in a coherent way such that all these people that have a role to play are focused on the same issue, or are we all playing a whole load of parallel games, most of which are having rather limited effect?

Q41 Chairman: They are running into the ground, actually.

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: You have gone at least two steps further—I was only in the sand. I think that is a valid question.

Q42 Chairman: What are you going to do about it?

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: I have an important role to play. We have resources for that.

Q43 Chairman: At the risk of sounding like Jeremy Paxman, let me ask you again: what are you going to do about it?

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: I am probably going to respond to the poking in the ribs that Lord Sainsbury is offering in this direction, when I am doing 8 days a week.

Q44 Dr Harris: In our report on the BBRSC we drew attention to the fact that the spend on public engagement was limited, the press releases that they put out as a proxy for their activity (whether it is a good proxy or a bad proxy is a separate question) were limited and most of those were announcing research grants rather than promoting the work of the Council or, more importantly, the work of the scientists themselves. The response we got from the Council was written by the Government (and that harks back to the first series of questions you were

12 May 2004 Professor Sir Keith O’Nions

asked, about whether we can get a view from the Council rather than the Government) saying, “It’s okay. It’s important they do what they do and they are doing it.” (I am paraphrasing.) Do you think if we were to do a future report with a similar recommendation we might be able to engage better with either the Council itself or the Government, who appears to write the Council’s responses under our present arrangements?

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: I sincerely hope so. I think this is an area where I have to give some effort, and I hope, if we meet in twelve months’ time, there is a better story to tell and you are yourself more satisfied with what is going on. I think that is really all I can say, other than to give you that undertaking.

Q45 Dr Harris: Clearly you will have to come up with some outcome measures, and that might be at an early stage, so that we can assess and evaluate. The problem is you might do a lot with no result. Would you agree that we need to try and measure this better?

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: I do. If I might digress very briefly, I do not want to go into too much detail but we are quite actively at the moment working on what, for want of a better word, is a performance management system which has defined outcomes and outputs towards delivering them, with appropriate performance measures, which I intend to agree with the research councils; and we will monitor it. This will be, I believe, good news for the research councils, I think it will be good news for those of us who are arguing for the budget and, hopefully, it will serve your purpose in giving targets and the sorts of outcomes that you would expect which you cannot find at the moment. That was the long answer, the short answer is yes.

Q46 Chairman: We will be back to hold you to that.

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: I bet. I sort of sense this.

Q47 Dr Turner: Can I bring you back to innovation? How do research councils respond to the recommendations of the Lambert Report? Also, do you have any view on research councils’ role in regional support of distribution of research support and relations with Regional Development Agencies?

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: I have some thoughts that are not policies. Not wishing to differentiate research councils from the broader scientific community at the moment, I think the broader scientific community (if that has any meaning) welcomes many aspects of Lambert’s report and recommendations and, indeed, the innovation report. I think it is true to say that there are debates on what capacity and responsibility RDAs may have in delivering some of that university business innovation agenda, and probably there is not a sort of instant high level of support amongst a lot of the community for that. If RDAs are to have a larger role in that, and some of them are already becoming extremely effective, it could be that the research councils help them improve their capacity to make

scientific judgements and research judgements. That is more in the category of thinking aloud than policy. Is that helpful?

Q48 Dr Turner: That is, especially given the variation between RDAs, in any event. I would just like to ask you one last quick point: do you feel that the work of research councils should be UK focused or do you think they should support research which has international development implications? Do you think that should be within their remit as well? Do you have a consistent cross-council policy on this?

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: In terms of international development?

Q49 Dr Turner: Yes.

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: The answer to your first one is yes, I think they should be UK focused, but in terms of international development could you amplify that a little bit? Do you mean in terms of a DFID view of international development?

Q50 Dr Turner: There are several views about that as well. One of the Committee’s other interests at the moment is deployment of science and technology in the international development context. We would like your view, whatever it is, on how you feel research councils can contribute, or whether they should contribute, in this area, irrespective of whether it is under a DFID label, or whatever.

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: Given that research councils are the bodies that are funding the greater part of the basic science and most of the applied science in the UK—and therefore have access to a massive part of our intellectual wealth and scientific wealth—and if government policy is calling for that to be deployed progressively in international development, they must have a part to play. If you ask now is there a very clear policy view across research councils as to the extent to which that role should be played and is it identifiable in budget terms, I do not think we are at that stage, but you must be right that that group of people and that intellectual base has to be a prime part of that process, if indeed the Government intends to emphasise international development in that way.

Q51 Bob Spink: Do we need a European Research Council?

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: We may be going to get one. As part of Framework 7 discussions the notion of a European Research Council is very firmly on the agenda. We have an informal group across government looking at this and RCUK have thought about this quite hard, and so on. The emerging view is that a European Research Council would indeed be very useful with particular constraints—ie, not doing what the framework programmes have done in applied science and supporting industry and so on. I think the emerging UK view is that of a European Research Council that was fulfilling some of the earlier aspirations of being a bit like the National Science Foundation and peer review grants to individual scientists. I think that is really where the UK is: if it is supporting basic

12 May 2004 Professor Sir Keith O’Nions

science and not doing what the framework programmes have been doing, if it meets the sort of quality peer review which is an underpinning strength of the UK system and is new money and is managed at something approaching, at least, arm’s length from the Commission, this could be beneficial to the UK. So I think within those limits there is a strong emerging view that it could be a very useful thing to have.

Q52 Bob Spink: Very briefly, was it the British Government that was pressing for this new creation, this innovation, or did it emerge elsewhere?

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: I may have to give you a note on that, but I will give you my recollection. Something may emerge quite quickly from behind, but I believe it was the initiative of somebody called Moyor from the Danish Government. I got a “yes” in my ear.

Q53 Bob Spink: Thank you for that. When can we expect a decision?

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: As part of Framework 7 negotiation . . . have we got a date for the completion of that? We will let you know. I have not got a completion date. We are still closer to the beginning than we are the end but it will come as part of the Framework 7 negotiations.

Q54 Bob Spink: If it was perceived that it was not in Britain’s interest to be a part of this ERC, could we stay outside?

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: I think with very great difficulty.

Q55 Bob Spink: So it will be linked to Framework 7?

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: Yes.

Q56 Chairman: It is not part of the red line of the Chancellor?

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: I cannot comment on that. I do not know. I was not aware that it was but I think if it is set up it will be cutting off our noses to spite ourselves if we do not participate. I think the game to be played for is to be sufficiently proactively engaged so that we can influence the system to do it in the most sensible way, which is the way I outlined.

Q57 Bob Spink: Would the ERC help us competitively, since we do compete economically with our neighbours in Europe, or would it inhibit our competitive position?

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: Again, thinking aloud here because we do not know exactly what the construct is going to look like, if it emerged and was run more or less along NSF or British research council lines with the sort of remit that I have suggested the emerging view would be supportive of it in the UK, then I think it would be very beneficial in sustaining the quality of basic research in this country and improving the attractiveness of basic research in this country. I think that would be its prime value to us in the UK. Given that we

do tend, as a nation, to be very competitive in this European arena one would hope to do quite well out of it.

Q58 Bob Spink: I think your expression was “providing it was new money”.

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: Yes.

Q59 Bob Spink: Let us just explore that, because this will consume a lot of public funds. Will any of the funds at all come from the funds that otherwise would have been spent on the British research effort?

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: I do not think I can tell you that at this stage. I think it is too early in the discussions to say whether we will use structural funds and what the Treasury offset would be.

Q60 Bob Spink: I accept that and I expected that. Can you then give us a view as to whether you would find it acceptable for the money going into the ERC to in any way deplete the moneys that would otherwise be available to the total British pot for research?

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: If our analysis was that the creation of this and the way it was structured actually reduced the amount of money that was going to be available for British research, either through the way in which it was shifting structural funds or the Treasury handling of it or indeed our ability to compete in that arena, then I think we would strongly oppose it.

Q61 Bob Spink: Does the OST or your ultimate employer, the DTI, have a policy on this at all, do you know?

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: On this issue? At the moment, as I say, there is an informal grouping across government discussing this, involving the Treasury, OST, DTI, higher education, and so on, and that is where we are. If it would help, I am quite happy to send you a note on where we are, who is involved and what the timescales are. You probably would not be surprised if I said it was a process that did not have quite the same sort of clarity behind it as, often, UK processes do.

Bob Spink: You have been most helpful, so far as you can be, with your knowledge, Sir Keith. Thank you.

Q62 Dr Harris: I want to ask you about constraints on grant holders and academic freedom of speech. In one of our earlier inquiries we felt that a number of individual researchers were reluctant to express their views on research councils in public for fear of affecting their chances of success in future grant applications. Do you think those fears are justified or understandable?

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: I think the RCUK and the research councils would be unaware of specific cases of that and would emphasise to you—and I would emphasise to you—that the award of grants from research councils is totally a function of excellence and review. So I am not aware of specific examples. It would be extremely worrying indeed if

12 May 2004 Professor Sir Keith O’Nions

there was an emerging air that if you are speaking up you will be penalised in some way, but RCUK would emphasise to you that they are not aware that that is the situation, and I think if there are things of that kind emerging we must all know about them very quickly.

Q63 Dr Harris: So there is no contractual constraint on grant holders?

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: Not on grant holders, no. In terms of research council laboratory employees—

Q64 Dr Harris: That was my next question. Go on.

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: As far as I am aware—particularly, let us say, in relation to the MRC where I believe the Committee has had an interest in this issue previously—there are certainly no contractual restrictions on employees of MRC laboratories speaking in public, other than the normal common law requirement to speak truthfully in terms of policy on that and to make a very clear distinction as to whether they are talking about the policy of that laboratory or expressing their own personal view—in the way that we all try to do in this arena.

Q65 Dr Harris: Given the answer to my first question, do you think there is a function for RCUK or yourself to act positively and proactively to make it clear that people should feel free to speak out and that that, actually, is not only important for its own sake but adds value to the process? It would certainly help us.

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: I would hope that we are in that territory. If there is a sense that we are not then we really should. I think it is extremely important that the scientific community are prepared to comment on issues of the day and are prepared to engage with the media—one hopes in a completely constructive and sensible manner. However, if there is a confusion as to the impact of making personal statements, as to the impact it may have on their employment or indeed on their potential to get a grant, if those worries are there then we must deal with that vigorously.

Q66 Dr Harris: On a slightly different issue, which is where funders place restrictions on publication—and this could be directly under DTI research—when they say, “You will not publish this without our permission as the funders; even though you are independent scientists we are going to call it government-funded work by independent scientists”, and they say, “We might decide not to publish this and we, as the funders, will have a say over the final copy. You are not to publish without letting us check it first”, is that compatible with academic freedom? To what extent do you think that is going on?

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: In general terms I would agree that it cannot be, and I would hope that those restrictions are imposed only in the most limited number of cases. There have to be cases which impact on national security, for example.

Q67 Dr Harris: I accept those.

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: I think one of the very difficult areas in this is around the national security issue, and that is the enormously rapid advance in biotechnology and biochemical research and the perceived benefits of access to some of that research from terrorist organisations.

Q68 Dr Harris: Leaving that aside, I am talking about stuff that might be embarrassing to government because it informs on policy and might produce “the wrong answers” as far as government policy is concerned. There has been some talk of this going on.

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: I am afraid I am not aware of specific examples. I would only reiterate that my own personal view is that if these things happen, and I am in complete agreement on where the difficulties are with national security and the grey areas that we are trying to struggle with at the moment, I would hope there were very, very powerful reasons for doing so. I just note that we are moving into the world of a Freedom of Information Act, so I would have thought it is going to be extraordinarily difficult to suppress, if we wanted to suppress. Within what I understand of the Freedom of Information Act it is very difficult to do that.

Q69 Dr Harris: This may be something we will come back to as a Committee. The final area is around the move and the call—which I have made and others have made—for publicly funded trials, particularly in the medical field, to be published regardless of whether they produce interesting results or positive results. Do you, as the Director General of the research councils, with overall responsibility for policy in some of these areas, have a view? Is it something that you can see as mandatory in the near future? Are you aware of the issue?

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: I am aware of the issue but not in depth. Probably the most efficient thing for me to do is to make you aware in writing of what the policy is and what items of policy may be under consideration.

Q70 Dr Harris: That would be helpful.

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: I think that is the most efficiency way of me dealing with that.

Chairman: Well, Sir Keith, you have survived again! Thank you very much for coming. I think we can say we will not see you next week but we will look forward to your 8-day week and we will follow up many of these questions. Thank you indeed for the answers you gave and the enthusiasm you are showing in your new task. We wish you well. Thank you.

Professor Sir Keith O’Nions: Thank you, Chairman.

APPENDIX

Memorandum from Professor Sir Keith O’Nions, Director General of the Research Councils

ROLE OF DGRC

I see the prime role of the Director General of the Research Councils as advising the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on the UK Science Budget. This involves developing a strategy for the distribution of funding within the science budget (for example between research, infrastructure, knowledge transfer and public understanding) as well as for the overall balance and direction of its research portfolio. This will require close working with the Minister of State for Science and Innovation, the Chief Scientific Adviser and the Research Councils and particularly strong interfaces with Treasury and the Department for Education and Skills.

RELATIONSHIP WITH RCUK

DGRC has specific responsibility for managing the government’s funding relationships with the Research Councils (as well as the Royal Society and the Royal Academy for Engineering), who are the primary delivery organisations of the Science Budget. Each of the Research Councils is an Executive Non-Departmental Public Body, funded by the government through the OST. Alongside allocation to the Councils is an associated delegation of responsibility and formal accountability to the Secretary of State for their role in delivering the Government’s strategy and the supporting strategic objectives. RCUK has been set up as a non-executive partnership to facilitate closer working between the Councils scientifically, strategically and operationally. I am currently in discussions with the Chief Executives of the Research Councils about how to ensure that DGRC is fully engaged in strategic matters in a way that is consistent with RCUK being able to offer independent advice to the Government and where, as Executive Non Departmental Public Bodies, responsibility for the day-to-day management of the Councils rests with the Chief Executives. These discussions are at an early stage and will involve consultation with the RCUK Review team, led by Phil Ruffles, and discussion with the Secretary of State and Permanent Secretary in DTI.

RELATIONSHIP WITH OST AND DTI

DGRC is responsible for the management of staff and resources in Science and Engineering Base Group in OST. I report directly to the Permanent Secretary and have access to the Secretary of State.

PRIORITIES

My initial priorities are to deploy resources made available from SR2002 and SR2004 to deliver the emerging 10 year strategy that has been announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

May 2004

