
Director's update

Purpose

1. This paper provides a summary of recent developments of potential interest to the Committee which are not otherwise on the agenda.

Recommendations

2. Members are invited to:
 - Note the updates contained in the paper and given orally; and
 - Seek further information from the Director, the SFC Executive or other members or observers as appropriate.

Financial implications

3. There are no direct financial implications associated with this paper.

Risk assessment

4. No policy advice is sought in this update paper, so no assessment has been performed. Items of committee business arising from developments reported here will have appropriate assessments included.

Impact assessments

5. No policy advice is sought in this update paper, so no assessments have been performed. Items of committee business arising from developments reported here will have appropriate assessments included.

Publication

6. This paper will be published on the Council website.

Further information

7. Contact: Helen Cross, Director for Research & Innovation, tel: 0131 313 6608, email: hcross@sfc.ac.uk.

Director's update

Purpose

8. This paper provides a summary of recent developments of potential interest to the Committee which are not otherwise on the agenda.

Introduction

9. This paper contains a selection of updates of potential interest to the committee since its March 2023 meeting.
10. The executive will continue to send notice of events or publications, for example, between meetings where timeliness is important.

Key updates - Future Research Assessment Programme and REF 2028

11. Announcements on future research assessment and REF 2028 are expected in the week beginning Monday 12 June.
12. The SFC Board considered a draft of the REF Initial Decisions document on 5 May and, taking account of points raised by RKEC and its FRAP sub-group, provided feedback on its development. Authority was delegated to the Chief Executive, drawing on the advice of the RKEC Chair, to approve any final modifications prior to publication in mid-June.
13. The Initial Decisions document has been amended following feedback from all four UK funding bodies' governing bodies. The publication will launch a consultation process due to be completed on 6 October. A discussion on the REF 2028 consultation is planned for RKEC's August meeting. The SFC team has renewed engagement with the Scottish REF managers' group and will attend their meeting on 21 June.

Scottish Government developments

New First Minister and Cabinet

14. Shortly after RKEC's previous meeting Humza Yousaf was appointed as First Minister, bringing with him a new Cabinet and key appointments for SFC. Initial engagements with our new Cabinet Secretary for Education, Jenny Gilruth, and our new Minister for Higher and Further Education and Veterans, Graeme Dey, have been positive, with both showing an interest in SFC's remit and, for Minister Dey, willingness to engage with and visit university research & innovation facilities and stakeholders. Minister Gilruth is particularly interested in the importance of Horizon Europe association for Scotland.
15. A new policy prospectus has been published - [Equality, opportunity, community: New leadership - A fresh start](#) – which outlines three priorities: Equality - Tackling poverty and protecting people from harm - Opportunity: A fair, green and growing economy; and

Community - Prioritising our public services. There is an element of continuity with previous Government focuses and NSET remains a headline strategy.

16. Innovation and entrepreneurship remain important drivers with the Innovation Strategy now published and an Entrepreneurial Campus Blueprint due to be published in the coming weeks. A separate update on the Innovation Strategy and the Blueprint will be provided at the meeting.

Independent Review of the Skills Delivery Landscape

17. The [final report](#) of the Independent Review of the Skills Delivery Landscape, announced in September 2022, has now been published. Led by James Withers, the report sets out a series of recommendations for wide-ranging reform including structural recommendations aimed at rationalising and improving the agency landscape.
18. Headline recommendations include: moving responsibility for national skills planning from Skills Development Scotland (SDS) and SFC to the Scottish Government; establishing a new single funding body, which brings together responsibility for all post-school learning and training funding functions from SFC, SDS and, potentially, the Student Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS); and substantively reforming SDS to focus on the development of a national careers service.
19. SFC [welcomed](#) the publication and will engage with Ministers, partner agencies, and stakeholders on future reform decisions, as we continue to deliver for tertiary education and skills, research and innovation across Scotland.
20. Minister Dey [responded](#) to say he was “supportive of the broad direction of travel” but will take “time to consider fully the detail of the recommendations and the practicalities of implementing them”.

Purpose & Principles

21. The Scottish Government continues to develop its [Purpose and Principles for Post School Education, Research and Skills](#). This work is intended to fulfil the Scottish Government’s commitment to publish a statement of strategic intent (now referred to as Purpose and Principles) following SFC’s recommendation in our Review of Tertiary Education and Research.
22. The final Purpose & Principles is due to be published in the coming months alongside a series of outputs including an implementation plan and logic models. SFC continues to provide advice and input to promote understanding and reflection of the critical importance of university research and KE to Scotland.

UK Government and UK R&D landscape developments

Horizon Europe and Pioneer

23. Negotiations continue on the UK’s association to Horizon Europe following the agreement of the Windsor Framework for the Northern Ireland Protocol in February.

What was initially hoped to be a swift process has become more protracted, despite the Department for Science, Innovation & Technology indicating that association remains their preference. The Department has indicated that “association would need to be on the basis of a good deal for the UK’s researchers, businesses and taxpayers”. The Horizon Europe Guarantee scheme has been [extended](#) to support UK Horizon Europe applicants until the end of September 2023.

24. Whilst negotiations continue, in early April DSIT [published a prospectus of opportunities](#) beyond Horizon Europe which will be implemented should the UK not be able to secure association on fair and appropriate terms. The “bold and ambitious” alternative is called Pioneer and comprises four interconnected offers:
 - *Pioneer Talent* which would enhance the UK’s investment in discovery research as well as the UK’s already strong talent offer;
 - *Pioneer Global* which would complement and enhance partners’ existing international partnerships;
 - *Pioneer Innovation* which would increase UK support to business-led innovation across sectors, technologies and UK regions; and
 - *Pioneer Infrastructure* which would provide additional funding into UK SRTI infrastructure, building on successful programmes such as World Class Labs.
25. We continue to work with Scottish Government colleagues to provide Scottish sector perspectives and views as alternatives are developed.

International student visa changes

26. Following the publication of the UK net migration figures in late May, the Home Office announced long-expected changes to dependant visas for international students. For students entering the UK from January 2024, it will no longer be possible for taught masters (PGT) students to bring dependants with them when they arrive to study. Work with universities to design an alternative approach to the current visa system was also announced.
27. This is likely to have a particularly adverse effect on areas of growth in international recruitment where recruitment is often predicated on dependant access to the UK. From the Scottish perspective, the policy change is likely to have greater potential impact on institutions who have large postgraduate taught populations from India, Nigeria, and Pakistan, where applicants are more likely to wish to bring dependants.
28. International student fee income plays a key role in cross-subsidizing many other areas of university activity – including, critically, research and innovation activity.

More UK Government strategies and UKRI stakeholder perception survey

29. A flurry of strategies with relevance for R&D have been published by the UK Government following the formation of the Department for Science, Innovation and

Technology (DSIT) and the publication of the new Science and Technology Framework in March. Key publications include:

- an update to the [Integrated Review](#) which places R&D as part of the UK's national security and international policy objectives;
 - a new [National Semiconductor Strategy](#) which sets out a twenty-year plan to secure the UK's position on design, research, and advanced chip manufacturing, with up to £200 million committed over 2023-25 and a total of up to £1 billion in the next decade to support its delivery; and
 - a new [National Quantum Strategy](#) which sets out a 10-year vision and actions for the UK to be a leading quantum-enabled economy, recognising the importance of quantum technologies for the UK's prosperity and security.
30. We are continuing to engage with Scottish Government colleagues regarding the response to Sir Paul Nurse's comprehensive review of the research, development and innovation organisational landscape published in March 2023.
31. UKRI is conducting a [stakeholder perception survey](#), which asks for feedback to help address issues, tailor activities and measure progress as an organisation. The [survey](#) is live until 16 June and should take approximately 10 minutes to complete.

Concordats and Agreements Review

32. The second and final phase of the review of the UK's research concordats and agreements was [published](#) in May. It signals the beginning of a journey rather than the end of a journey as might have been expected from a lengthy review process and includes recommendations to:
- create a shared understanding of positive research culture; then
 - work to better understand the data and reporting requirements of the 12 separate initiatives, map overlaps, and explore opportunities to streamline reporting requirements; and then
 - see how there could be alignment with other instruments in the system, e.g. REF2028
33. The report does not recommend who should lead on this activity, but it may be likely that UUK lead on work overall. The review explored whether there is scope to rationalize twelve existing concordats and commitments including the Concordat to Support Research Integrity and the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers.

SFC activity

Fully staffed team

34. SFC's Research & Innovation Directorate is now fully staffed after we welcomed a number of new starts since RKEC's last meeting. Lauren Knight and Joey Chopra have joined us as Senior Policy/Analysis Officers and Victoria Borthwick has joined us as a Policy Officer in the Knowledge Exchange & Innovation Team, while Oliver Wright has joined us as Policy Officer in the Research Team.
35. I know that RKEC members will extend a big welcome to our new team members and look forward to hearing from them at this and future meetings.

Alliances for Research Challenges

36. Following a short period of further development, the Quantum Technologies ARC proposal has been recommended for funding. We expect to officially announce funding for the ARC in the early summer giving us a full complement of four Alliances for Research Challenges.
37. The ARCs assessment panel, chaired by Prof Lesley Yellowlees, recommended SFC play an active role in supporting the development of the ARCs and consider ways in which RKEC could be used to provide further support, guidance and oversight to all ARCs. We will bring this to the Committee's next meeting in August.
38. An in-person launch event is being co-developed with the ARCs and will take place in October 2023.

Advisory groups

39. [SFC's Advisory Group on Supporting Scotland's Postgraduate Researchers](#), chaired by Dr Kay Guccione (Head of Research Culture & Researcher Development, University of Glasgow) and Professor Nick Fyfe (Vice Principal for Research and Community Engagement, Robert Gordon University), has met four times.
40. The main focus of the first three meetings of the group has been to provide recommendations on Research Postgraduate Grant principles and a future accountability approach. The group is also exploring issues relating to equality, diversity and inclusion and key developments within the postgraduate research landscape, such as the UKRI New Deal for Postgraduate Research. RKEC will consider RPG accountability proposals developed with the group during the August meeting.
41. Following RKEC's discussions in March, we have convened a Research Accountability and Assurance Working Group to bring together key perspectives from across the Scottish university research system to provide us with balanced and representative advice on the development of future research accountability and assurance (RAA) processes. The group is being chaired by Anne Anderson and will meet for the first time on Monday 12 June.

42. The group will meet over the summer and a paper will be brought to RKEC's August meeting for consideration ahead of sector consultation in the Autumn.

Research landscape analysis update

43. Following the discussions at the joint SFC and US RKEC session in April we are considering the implications for our evidence-based research strategy. We will bring a paper to RKEC in August that explores our future research drivers and strategy.

Trusted research

44. Directorate staff have been speaking to Trusted Research leads in universities about how different institutions are managing the issue, to what extent the SFC should be involved in this and whether and how we might assist the sector. Generally, progress is being made although different institutions are at different stages. The most immediate action is likely to be bringing institutional representatives together to share information. We will engage with Universities Scotland on how this might be taken forward.
45. We have an update meeting with staff from the Edinburgh team of the UK Research Collaboration Advice Team (RCAT) on 14 June.

Recommendations

46. Members are invited to:
 - Note the updates contained in the paper and given orally; and
 - Seek further information from the Director, the SFC team or other members or observers as appropriate.