

Independent Review of SFC's Research Pooling Initiative: Call for evidence

Response from Ian Halliday, Professor Emeritus, University of Edinburgh.

I was the Scottish Universities Physics Alliance (SUPA) Chief Executive from 2005-2010. I accepted this position at 4 days/week after retiring from the position of Chief Executive of the Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council (PPARC) which I had held for 7 years. The reason for the 4days/week limitation was that I had been chosen to be the Chairman of the European Science Foundation, had also accepted a position on the Board of FermiLab the American equivalent of CERN and had been invited to serve on the Board of the Japanese government's World Premier Institute (WPI) programme.

The latter, in particular, gave me an interesting window into a different University system facing the same global competitive pressures but with a different history and a very different budget scale to SUPA!

In all three contexts there were strong feelings of envy towards the European/UK context.

I have seen the submission by the SUPA Executive Committee and will not attempt to give equivalent detail of results but will focus on mechanisms.

Section 1: Initial research pooling initiative

Q1a. What has been the impact of the initial research pooling initiative?

During my time as CEO of PPARC it was clear that there would be a review of the RAE system so I made a point of being present as an observer at the physics panel meetings in 1993. Given my Edinburgh background and the keen Welsh/Scottish comparisons I had heard in Swansea I listened with great interest.

This information drove many of my ideas about REF in SUPA. Mainly that SUPA departments were seriously underselling themselves. The results, in particular the Strathclyde performance at the last REF, are **beyond** any promises made in SUPA bids.

More over the very existence of SUPA gave clear strategic edge to the submissions.

The challenge will be to maintain this high level into the future. My personal view is that SUPA continued to undersell itself by not putting in a joint submission. The SUPA submissions in 2008 were all mullered over by the SUPA Heads and individual co-ordinators. This was undoubtedly one of the pieces of machinery that gave SUPA Executive Committee a clear view of SUPA's strengths and weaknesses.

The attainment of such levels in REF is important for at least two reasons. Firstly, it gives potential faculty an independent view of the status of a department or research group. This is important as the quality of faculty is, ultimately the major driver of an Institute's

reputation. Secondly the grade remains in the minds of all grant awarding panels as to intellectual level and support available.

One of my more pleasant duties in SUPA was attending the final appointments panels for lecturers in SUPA. I was impressed at the quality.

While in PPARC I served on the EU Research Advisory Board (EURAB). Here and as the UK Research Council's European representative I was heavily involved in the debates about the European Research Council about which the UK originally was less than enthusiastic. I convinced the then Science Minister David Sainsbury. I still remember a discussion in Treasury which ended with the (now very august) Treasury official agreeing; using the phrase "You mean we will finally discover if those Oxbridge b...ds are as good as they say they are?". Well the SUPA ERC results certainly prove, in pan-European competition, that they are as good as they say they are.

The timing of the SUPA I and SUPA II bids to SFC meant that the SUPA I money was on the table when I arrived as CEO so the task was to spend it effectively. Thus lectureships, the SUPA graduate video system and sharing equipment across the pools. A major effort was getting the graduate courses up and running at a credible, international level. The details are in the SUPA Exec Committee document. Such a system is a sine qua non of any globally competitive research grouping.

But we were also informed a second bid would be accepted so the task was to get this agreed across the partner Universities and departments. This area is where I believe SUPA has had the greatest impact on Scottish HEI's. The SUPA leadership tried very hard to get the plethora of SUPA research groups to be ambitious. The ideas, that after strong debate, became the basis of the SUPA II bid to SFC then had to be agreed by the HEI's in SUPA for the matching funds. At this point the correct tensions between the individual HEI's and the pooled SUPA became visible. Several HEI's were very aware of the intense discussions and difficult decisions behind the bid and therefore were content that this was a well-designed plan for Scottish Physics.

I am sure that this strategic plan and SFC and HEI funding played a major role in the REF 2014 results. The plan and the investment decisions would not have happened without the SUPA pooling arrangements.

Q1b. What lessons can be learnt from the research pooling initiative?

I stress that pooling will only work well if the partners know and trust each other. This is why I have underlined the openness re the RAE and REF as an important piece of education for all concerned within SUPA. Secondly the debates over the SUPA II bid and the implicit plan for Scottish Physics as a collective entity were important.

Thus, if SFC believes pooling has improved the Scottish performance and I believe this is proven in Physics then I believe SFC funding for pooling improvement bids would be money well spent; on a 4/5 REF cycle perhaps? Here the real gain is to improve the individual University expenditure by insisting on a proper agreed pool plan. Here there are two gains first the improved decisions and secondly the fact that any equipment bought will be exploited much more efficiently. This has a flavour of the Canadian government's insistence on a proper strategic plan for each university.

Section 2: Pooling now and in the future

The competitive landscape does not grow any easier or simpler. Many countries compete for scientific talent. So scientific talent will become ever more mobile. Thus, for Scotland to remain competitive it is clear that it must compete for talent at all levels and from all sources.

As I mentioned at the beginning the UK has many admirable selling points seen from elsewhere; the freedom given to young researchers; the openness of Research Council funding.; the English language; the flexibility of the salary system.

But the probability of Conservative limits on recruitment and possible divorce from EU\ERC funding would be major disasters in terms of money but more importantly visibility.

Q2a. In the current research landscape, what is the perception of, and role for, the pools?

In the case of SUPA it is clear to me that it has had great added value.

But, seen from the side-lines, apart from the SUPA Studentships, it is becoming less visible as an entity. Does the outside Physics community know what the various infrastructure investments have delivered.? Will SUPA retain the high REF rankings? A University department has a historical on-going existence and visibility. A pooling arrangement needs to explicitly make its presence and influence visible.

Q2b. Should research pools have a continuing role in the Scottish research base?

I believe the answer is unequivocally yes for global competitive reasons.

I see no reason why the KT agenda cannot be pushed further within pooling. Although skirmishes with local HEI KT depts need to be sorted out.

Section 3: Anything else

As I have mentioned above the SUPA II bid, with which I was involved, ended up engaging at a serious and constructive way (in general) with the local HEI decision making. In general, the HEI's appreciated a boiled down, tensions resolved plan. But I believe if Pooling is to continue and grow as I believe it must then equally I believe these interactions need to be institutionalised in some way. For example, some HEI's insisted on the SUPA CEO explaining and putting his head on the block with promises as to results. In others the decision making disappeared into a labyrinthine black hole.

I believe serious consideration needs to be given to the position and support system provided to a Pool CEO. The temptation is to appoint a high-class researcher at the peak of his career. However, heading up a pool of many departments without a formal reporting structure is a very complex job. Especially as there is an underlying thought that really, he/she only controls the Pool money which is already ear-marked if not spent. Who is actually responsible for the success of a Pool and what are the decision-making tools? On the other hand, a pool CEO who is merely one of the HEI dept Heads is a very different political animal from a CEO appointed to make the Pool a success.