

Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee

The 79th meeting of the Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee of the Scottish Funding Council was held virtually by Zoom on 20 January 2021 at 10.00am.

Present

Chair

Professor Lesley Yellowlees

Board members

Mhairi Harrington, Professor Irene McAra-McWilliam, Douglas Mundie, Caroline Stuart

Members

Professor Anne Anderson, Dr Caroline Cantley, Professor Nicholas Fyfe, Dr Alicia Greated, Dr Jano van Hemert, Professor Julian Jones, Professor Andy Porter, Dr Helen Reddy, Professor Wayne Powell (other member)

Observers

Morven Cameron (HIE), Helen Cross (UKRI), Laura Dougan (Scottish Government), Dr Ian Blewett (SE), Dr Carolyn Reeve (BEIS)

Apologies received

Members: Ms Sara Rae, Professor Jonathan Seckl

Observer: Dr Pieter van de Graaf (SG)

SFC Executive:

Dr Cat Ball, Gary Bannon, Fiona Bates, David Beards, Morag Campbell, Dr Stuart Fancey, Jenny Jamieson, Robin Lee, Keith McDonald, Hazel McGraw, Morven Pritchard, Andrew Youngson

21/01 Welcome from Chair

The Chair and the Director both welcomed members to the 79th meeting of the Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee.

The Chair welcomed Ian Blewett who was replacing Alison Munro as observer from Scottish Enterprise. The Chair noted that Professor Nick Fyfe was moving to Robert Gordon University as Vice Principal, Research and would be starting March 2021.

Update from Director (RKEC/21/01)

The Director introduced the Director's update paper for the January meeting. The trial of an update paper as a regular agenda item had been agreed at the December meeting and would provide a summary of recent developments of interest to members.

The Director covered the end of the Brexit transition process; REF2021 submission arrangements; the Bilateral Review of the future relationship between Scotland and Ireland in terms of further education, higher education and research and innovation; the virtual visit from UKRI's CEO Professor Dame Ottoline Leyser; and Covid Research Laboratory Guidance.

Helen Cross, UKRI noted that there was an intention for the UK levelling up agenda to deliver simpler systems and processes for grant funding.

21/02 Minutes of previous meetings: 3rd December 2020 (RKEC/20/min6)

The minute was agreed.

21/03 Net zero and Scotland's green recovery and future – update on Scottish Government strategy and considerations for SFC's review (RKEC/21/03)

Robin Lee introduced this paper that:

- Provided RKEC with an update on a range of developments relating to the response to the climate emergency;
- Invited RKEC to consider the role for universities and colleges, relating to research and innovation, in achieving the Scottish Government target for net-zero.

Recommendations

- Note update on recent UK and international policy developments;
- Consider the role for universities and colleges in supporting Scottish Government to meet net-zero targets;

- Consider how SFC's Review can help us embed climate change action in our approach.

The Committee noted the following in response:

- i) Research and innovation is central to net zero and in solving the climate emergency.
- ii) Members agreed the importance of defining the role that university and colleges will play through managed engagement where the right sector resources are utilised in support of the net zero transition
- iii) Achieving net zero will require an interconnected eco-system that can drive a themed agenda forward across all sectors.
- iv) Vignettes and case studies are not sufficient tools for influencing impact. As a committee, we should consider how we adopt thought leadership for changing behaviours across society and enabling transformative and productive cultural engagement.
- v) A holistic view will bring lasting results.

21/04 Review of research assessment (RKEC/21/03)

Morag Campbell introduced this paper that sought RKEC's perspectives on the development of a UK work plan considering future approaches to the assessment of HEIs' research.

Recommendations

The Committee is invited to discuss, and advise the executive on: aspects of REF 2021 of particular interest for evaluation; and key elements/directions in working towards a desirable approach to future research assessment.

The Committee noted the following:

- vi) Members welcomed their involvement with the Review acknowledging that the opportunity for Committee input was critical.
- vii) The REG has consistently delivered a sizable return on investment.
- viii) The burden of research is significant. Group returns from research units are more conducive to research cultures and are more likely to deliver results.
- ix) As it currently stands, can research excellence be demonstrated as value for society or does it actually describe excellent

- research? And how does this relate to quality? Can these qualitative 'costs' be more about time and less about funding?
- x) Improved bureaucracy that is more straightforward may also reduce burden on staff.
 - xi) Reflection on whether the REF aligns with current culture could preserve its relevance for the future as well as measuring its capacity to influence culture.

21/05

SFC Review Phase 2 (research and innovation)

Keith McDonald and Cat Ball introduced this item that:

- Sought agreement from RKEC for our proposed 'emergency years' response for the UIF;
- Engaged RKEC on the broad themes and questions that are shaping the exploration of SFC's longer-term strategic direction in phase two; and
- Invited RKEC to agree plans for a follow-on workshop session with the Committee in February.

Recommendations

- Agree the proposed 'emergency years' response for the UIF;
- Consider the themes and key questions underpinning the exploration of our longer-term strategic direction;
- Provide input on the themes and questions during breakout group discussions; and
- Agree to the organisation of an additional RKEC workshop session in February to gather further input from the Committee.

The Committee noted the following:

- xii) Members broadly agreed with the executive's proposal for SFC's emergency years' response for the UIF including the embedment of net zero in all of its thinking.
- xiii) Our approach to both place and research excellence must carry equity so that neither are undermined and the benefits are universal.

The Committee proceeded to attend their breakout sessions organised around five themes:

- challenges and mission-led funding;

- place;
- excellence in a challenging environment;
- people (talent & skills, researcher development and research culture);
- and boosting and driving the innovation agenda

After which, the Committee agreed to organise a follow-up workshop session in February in order to explore these themes in further detail, explore SFC's longer-term strategic direction and inform phase 3.

21/06 Forward agenda for discussion (RKEC/21/05)

At the meeting of 14 October 2020, RKEC agreed to revise the forward agenda to take account of the emergency years 2020-22 and consequential policy adjustments due to the impact of the pandemic. This paper notifies the Committee of proposed agenda items for the future business of the Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee. These items take account of views expressed by Committee members.

To enable alignment with the SFC Council, the forward agenda plan follows the same format as that used for the SFC Council, for easy mapping.

Recommendations

The Committee is invited to note the proposed agenda items and suggest any further additional or amendments to the list.

The Committee had no suggestions at this meeting for the forward agenda. The executive agreed to revise the forward agenda as required for the next committee meeting on 20 April 2021.

21/07 AOCB

There was no other business.