

Key Partners Event 2013

Working Together for Engineering and the Physical Sciences

The 2013 Key Partners Event brought together for the first time, representatives from EPSRC's Framework Universities, Strategic Partner Universities, Strategic Business Partners and Council for a day of productive discussion.

Opened by Paul Golby, chair of EPSRC's Council and closed by Dave Delpy (CEO) the event was comprised of facilitated discussions between representatives of each group of participants, including EPSRC staff and a key note speech from Mr Martin Donnelly, BIS Permanent Secretary. Council's participation in the event allowed them to hear first-hand, thoughts from our key partners on the Industry Strategy, how we should respond and what we should take into account when we consider future action to protect and or grow research excellence; topics that Council will have to discuss and work with the Executive and partners to address.

Following Paul's vision for EPSRC, we started the day looking at outcomes from our partnerships, highlighting success stories and examining the source of that success. It was recognised that it is hard to pin down all the specific contributions to success stories but it was evident that EPSRC has a clear and highly valued role as an enabler of engagement. EPSRC's unique position allows it to have an overview that it uses to everyone's advantage, opening doors and guiding partners through a complex landscape. It was noted that the industry partners in the room were almost exclusively large companies and yet it was recognised that significant innovation happens in SMEs. Achieving growth via SMEs and the extent to which they should be focussed on as partners when balanced against the effort it would take to reach them, was a topic of discussion.

The second session on future resilience of the research base asked a very open question about how we might maintain (or ideally grow) the volume of excellent research in the UK given the changing HEI environment and current economic constraints. This session which was designed to raise the subject and allow an airing of early thoughts provided much food for thought for EPSRC's Council and the Executive. There was agreement that excellence thrives on independence, openness, transparency and creativity, advances often coming at discipline boundaries (which in themselves are not a problem, the management of them often being the issue). People were seen as being vital to research excellence, researchers need a vibrant environment to maintain excitement and interest; focal points to push at the boundaries; and facilities to support them. But flow of people is a challenge, University research needs to remain an attractive option for bright people and continuation of employment and career progression need to be managed well to keep these bright people engaged. A significant proportion of discussion was focussed on balancing across the portfolio – breadth versus depth and fundamental versus applied. Opinion on whether concentration of resource and focus on larger awards has gone far enough or needs to go further was divided.

A number of drivers and inhibitors that EPSRC can influence were highlighted:

What are the drivers EPSRC can influence?

- Support for people at all levels - keeping people motivated, provide longer term funding, support for adventurous research, and look for rising stars
- Mentoring to drive ambition and impact for new academics
- UK has significant strength in systems integration - bridging and translating between disciplines, is there an opportunity to share this with industry?
- Understanding business, creating and promoting opportunities
- Publicising success, pride in our excellence; setting the right tone and using the right language; gathering evidence of outputs

What are the inhibitors EPSRC can influence?

- Lack of support for infrastructure
- The tendency to retreat to silos when budgets are constrained
- Helping to cross the boundaries that exist (RC's, TSB, industry strategy, regions, Europe)
- Tendency to be too directive, keep management to a minimum
- Lack of academic recognition (beyond PI, impact generated etc.)

After lunch we were joined by Martin Donnelly, BIS permanent secretary who introduced the industrial strategy. Discussion that followed looked at how all partners could respond to this industrial strategy that the EPS research base are already well aligned to and how we should use this position to our mutual advantage.

What does the industrial strategy mean for our partnerships?

The Industrial Strategy is the current political way of thinking and is aimed at stimulating growth. EPSRC's remit fits well to the sectors highlighted in the industrial strategy, which gives research in the EPSRC remit a direct link to growth and a strategic advantage. It is a strong position that the Council should capitalise on while recognising that this should not limit our perspective

Partnership is key to responding to the industrial strategy, EPSRC was seen as being in the prime position to take the lead in responding through relationship building and acting as a point of reference for communication. However, beyond this initial focal point, Universities and industry have a key role in facilitating interactions down the supply chain and have the power to build long standing relationships the and trust required.

Issues such as the restrictions in capital spending have actually resulted in closer working that has produced other benefits; this way of working should be protected and built upon via a focussed conversation with groups of Universities rather than individuals. There would also be merit in this being with a group of companies from the same sector rather than individual companies. However, responding is not confined to the partners in the room, a large successful research group cannot support itself from one source and there will be a role for TSB, international partners etc.

There was some discussion on whether there is a regional element to how we should respond. The Universities have taken on a higher degree of focus since the demise of the RDAs. But some questions remain: Will there be priorities for regions? How does EPSRC respond to this given its national focus?

Understandably, given the need for multidisciplinary and cross- disciplinary working, some risks were also identified:

- There is a risk that cross-cutting enabling technologies are lost through this sector focus
- Is the Industrial Strategy effective enough at accommodating cross-disciplinary activities that cross sector boundaries

What can all parties present do to secure this?

Communicating our portfolio:

- Use REF submissions via PVCs to communicate the portfolio in these areas
- Systematic use of case studies and an improved evidence base
- Use the Impact Acceleration Accounts to gather evidence
- Demonstrate short term impact (less than 10 years) as well as longer term (10-20 years)
- Use BIS Industry Sector relevance as a tick box on ROS

Working together:

- Don't pull back on schemes that build relationships with industry
- Identify research priorities in each industry sector from the outset and work with industry to partner in these areas, working over a longer term to deliver benefit to both partners
- Greater dialogue to get cross-fertilisation of ideas from industry to inform academic research programmes
- EPSRC to facilitate/broker dialogue in each of the sectors and help shape development
- We cannot rely just on our existing partnerships, we need to review where we have business partnerships in each sector and consider if new links are needed, for example with Venture Capital companies

In Summary

This gathering of our key partners was particularly timely in that it provided an opportunity for the BIS triennial review team to interact with our partners at the end of the day and gather further evidence against their consultation questions to feed into the triennial review.

The views expressed in the discussions will be digested and considered further by EPSRC's Executive and Council. For example, EPSRC's initial response to the Industrial Strategy was discussed by Council at their meeting on the 6th March. It was noted by Council members and the Executive that they Key Partners Event had been extremely constructive, notable for the positive collective endeavour and engagement.