Introduction

Welcome to the spring 2012 issue of the newsletter. The focus is again on Shaping Capability, this time looking at how the peer review process, and particularly the panel mechanism, has been developed to accommodate this. Again we have not sought to replicate all the general information we have published about this, but have instead tried to concentrate here on what this means for you in your role as a college member.

We have updated the college web page, including the page specifically for college members with the aim of better collecting the key information you might need together in one place. Feedback on this page would be most welcome including likes, dislikes and suggestions for how it could be improved.

Developing Peer Review to Support Shaping Capability

This is the third in a series of articles that explain the changes that EPSRC is making to its processes to enable us to shape our portfolio of research and training in areas which are internationally excellent and nationally important. The first article, published in the Summer 2011 issue, explained the rationale and aims for this broad activity, with the second article, in the Autumn 2011 issue, providing more detailed information about the introduction of National Importance as an additional assessment criterion and how this should be used within peer review. This latest article provides some further guidance on National Importance, and also explains how the panel process has been developed to incorporate these additional requirements.

Shaping Capability

To maintain the UK’s global research standing in light of increasing international competition, and with limited funding available to us, we must focus our investments to ensure we use resources effectively, to build the capability we need to compete and gain the most long term benefit for the UK.

Working with our major stakeholders, and with the support and input of our Strategic Advisory Teams and agreement of Council, we have mapped EPSRC’s current portfolio to 113 identified research areas. The action categories for these research areas have all been published and are available to view online through the ‘Our portfolio’ section of the EPSRC webpage. You will see details of our strategy and approach for each research area along with other information giving additional context on EPSRC’s investment.
Shaping capability is not about predicting where new research discoveries will come from but does seek to ensure EPSRC continues to invest in a balanced portfolio, with any changes managed over time. We will monitor the shape of the portfolio and the scale of investment in different areas as it evolves and continue to encourage the free generation of ideas, curiosity, and research creativity.

We will continue to accept and fund proposals in all research areas, including those we have identified as wishing to reduce our investment. We are not stopping funding these areas but expect to see some reduction in the overall investment to create pace to grow other priority areas. It is likely that competition for funding in reduce areas will be greater as a result. In addition the strategy for areas identified as grow, maintain or reduce may encourage a particular focus e.g. on research that meets particular industry needs, addresses a societal challenge or community identified grand challenge.

Peer review is central to achieving the goal of Shaping Capability but it is clear that we need to adapt our current process to effectively support this. In so doing, we wish to emphasise that we remain fully committed to our principles of peer review. We particularly wish to re-affirm that research quality will remain pre-eminent in assessing applications and that we will only support applications that are deemed excellent as judged through peer review. Our investment decisions will continue to be made on the basis of advice from Panels. This advice will continue to be in the form of a rank ordering of proposals and EPSRC will allocate funding in priority order based on this advice.

National importance

We introduced National Importance as a major secondary criterion on 15 November 2011. We have since updated our guidance on this, based on feedback from the community, to provide greater clarity and to better define the relationship between National Importance and the current UK research landscape.

National Importance is now defined as the extent, over the long term, for example 10-50 years, to which the research proposed;

- contributes to, or helps maintain the health of other research disciplines, contributes to addressing key UK societal challenges, contributes to current or future UK economic success and/or enables future development of key emerging industry(s)

- meets national strategic needs by establishing or maintaining a unique world leading research activity (including areas of niche capability)

- fits with and complements other UK research already funded in the area or related areas, including the relationship to the EPSRC portfolio and our stated strategy set out in "Our Portfolio"

Panel Process

Clearly to implement these changes effectively requires that our peer review process, and particularly our panel process, is adapted to accommodate them. Equally clearly this needs to be done with great care, and should keep to a minimum the degree of modification involved. To ensure this, we have been working over the past few months with a group of experienced panel members and chairs, drawn from a range
of research communities across the EPSRC remit and almost all of them college members, to identify the optimum way forward.

We started in December last year with a workshop that looked at the panel process in detail and identified a range of options as to how our objectives could be met. We then organised a series of pilot panels to test further options. The outputs of these events all strongly reinforced the view that we should seek restrict changes to the minimum necessary. The outcomes of the workshop and pilot panels were presented to a Sub Group of Council who used them to develop a recommendation to Council on a revised peer review process. On the basis of this input Council then were then able to agree how this process should be modified. More information about this, and who was involved, is available on our webpage.

There are four elements to the panel process that have been modified to enable panel members to most effectively prioritise the proposals they are considering:

• Panels will receive a contextual briefing from EPSRC to help them take this background information into account more consistently in reaching their judgement of the relative priority of the proposals they are considering;

• National importance will be taken into account as a major secondary assessment criterion in determining the merit of each proposal, including the views of both applicant and reviewers on how the proposed research relates to both the wider research landscape, and to the EPSRC portfolio;

• Speakers (introducers) initial scores will be requested earlier in advance of the meeting to enable EPSRC and the panel to reflect on them prior to the meeting, and to help focus discussion during the meeting – for example on proposals where there is a significant divergence of view or where there is a cluster of proposals rated very close to one another;

• The number of Panel members speaking to each proposal will increase from 2 to 3 people to encourage an even richer discussion on the relative merit of proposals and how they complement the existing portfolio.

What does this mean for you as a College Member?

The emphasis now moves from developing these changes to implementing and operating them. We understand that some of you may disagree with these changes. However, if you agree to review a proposal then we must ask that you do so fully, providing specific comment on its strengths and weaknesses for all required criteria. Leaving sections unanswered, using a generic response not specific to the proposal being considered or using the review as a vehicle to deliver your objection to the policy will simply render the review unusable, essentially to the disbenefit of the applicants concerned.

We have now published the relative funding trajectories and strategies for our entire portfolio and consequently we now expect all applicants to describe their proposals in the context of that portfolio as part of their National Importance statement. When you are reviewing proposals in future we would therefore ask that you now explicitly comment on how the proposed research fits with and complements other UK research already funded in the area or related areas, including the relationship to the published EPSRC portfolio and strategy. You should base this judgement as much as you can on your own expert knowledge of the field but we strongly suggest you further inform
your review by reading the relevant strategy and rationale statements set out in “Our Portfolio”. Additionally you can view details of all grants current in an area using Grants on the Web.

Should you be asked to serve on a panel over the summer then it will continue to operate using the current process, which of course already includes using national importance as a major secondary criterion. From the autumn onwards the modified process described above will come into operation and panels will start to consider the context of the EPSRC portfolio when ranking proposals. In either case you will be provided with clear guidance on what you are being asked to do, and how you should do it.

**New Peer Review College Nomination Mechanism Implemented**

EPSRC has now implemented a new mechanism that allows members of the research community to be nominated as potential new members of its peer review college. EPSRC will draw on Individuals identified in this way to refresh the membership each year to replace losses and allow the membership to be updated and rebalanced.

There is no need for existing members to re-nominate themselves, your membership continues until you ask, or are asked, to stand down.

A key element of the college is that as members you have been endorsed by the community as appropriate to review your colleagues work. It is important that this aspect of college membership is maintained, and this new mechanism is intended to help ensure this.

Nominees can come from a range of backgrounds (academe, industry, charity, government, health service) and from the UK or overseas. They need to demonstrate their active engagement in research, and an appropriate standing within their research community. To be considered for membership the nominee must attract support from five researchers, who should be independent from them and who must be either a member of the current college or to have either reviewed for EPSRC in the past three years or have been the PI on a research proposal submitted to EPSRC in the past three years.

As existing members I hope you will feel able to help both by encouraging colleagues you feel would strengthen the college to put themselves forward as members, and where appropriate to be prepared to support those who have put themselves forward in this way. More information about how individuals can nominate themselves, and how you can support their nomination, is available on the EPSRC webpage. If you have a specific enquiry about this mechanism this should be sent to collegemembership@epsrc.ac.uk

**College Balance**

When talking about college membership we regularly refer to the balance of the college. So what do we mean by this? Basically, this is the requirement that the demography of the college broadly matches that of the broader active research community it serves. Clearly there are many ways in which this community can be defined, but for EPSRC we have taken a pragmatic approach and define this as
everyone who has interacted with us as applicant, collaborator or reviewer over the previous five years. This identifies a group that is highly dynamic in terms of the individuals identified but surprisingly stable in terms of its broader demography. It consistently comprises roughly 35,000 individuals, with stable distributions in terms of age, gender, location and background. It is these distributions that we also seek to maintain in the college. The various diagrams below capture a current snapshot of college membership in this respect.
There are a number of consistent trends that we have been able to identify over time. The gender balance is steadily if slowly improving as the number of women in both college and community grows, while the age distribution has become much more even across the age ranges again in both college and community. Within the college the proportion of user-based members has increased significantly, but still remains below the target level of 20%. More disappointing is the proportion of members drawn from outside the UK which remains stubbornly under half the desired level.

Software as an Infrastructure

EPSRC believes that the large suite of codes used across all the areas of research we support needs to be regarded as a research infrastructure in its own right. We have therefore developed a strategy for investing in software, ensuring that our funding (current and future) adds value to the complex and evolving e-infrastructure ecosystem and supports the needs and requirements of the Engineering and Physical Sciences community. No-one questions the principle that research equipment should be maintained and operated by appropriately skilled technicians, and with this strategy we are now taking the view that this should also extend to software, and that for research using or extending this resource we should equally look for appropriate expertise to maintain and develop it. So, if when you are asked to review proposals you see requests for software development effort or resource then this should not only be seen as an eligible cost but also as a resource that we would encourage to be used effectively to ensure the sustainability and robustness of software which underpins, and often pushes the boundaries of, scientific research.

Further information is available on the EPSRC webpage about this strategy, and the agreed action plan to implement it.

Web Page

The EPSRC has recently run an on-line survey seeking feedback on our web page. This has just closed but, if you missed it, your comments would still be very welcome so please feel free to feed back your views on the scope, content, and usability of our site.

We are starting to test new visualisation tools to allow dynamic display of various data on the webpage and some college members will be invited to comment on the prototype designs. If you are approached in this way we hope you will feel able to help.

Membership Matters

Keeping in Touch

Every college newsletter edition published includes another list of college members we have lost contact with. There are several reasons for this and to avoid them we would ask:

- If your circumstances change please update your record, particularly your contact details on Je-S as otherwise we waste significant time and effort sending reviews to old addresses;

- If you no longer wish to remain a college member please tell us, to avoid problems with us sending you reviews you no longer wish to receive;
Some people have opened a new record when they move rather than updating their existing one. Please do not do this as it creates system problems and we must merge the records to correct things with a risk that your history, including your college membership, is over-written and lost;

Some people are shown as “gone away” when they are clearly still where they have always been. This is normally due to problems with e-mail delivery, where our attempts to contact you fail, generally by being blocked by your fire-wall. As college members can you please try to avoid this by identifying EPSRC as a recognised safe organisation, and importantly do the same for the RCUK Shared Service Centre who now issue many e-mails on our behalf.

### Standing Down

The following long-standing members have chosen to stand down from the college:

- Professor Alison Mainwood
- Dr Mike Ross
- Dr Vaughan Stanger
- Dr Paul Vangasse

We wish to record our grateful thanks for the important contribution they have made as members of the college and wish them well for the future.

### Gone Away

Again we do have a group of members that we have lost contact with. If you are still in contact with anyone listed below can you ask them to check that their contact details on Je-S are correct and up to date. If they believe their details are correct so that we should be able to contact them, or if they no longer wish to remain a college member, they should contact us at college@epsrc.ac.uk

- Professor M Brown, previously at University of Hertfordshire
- Mr Christophe Chassaing, previously at Pfizer
- Professor Daoyi Chen, previously at University of Liverpool
- Professor Walter Craig, previously at McMaster University
- Dr Madeleine Glick, previously at Intel Corporation
- Dr Ken Lawrie, previously at GlaxoSmithKline
- Dr John Mullins, previously at Thomas Swan Ltd
- Dr Angus Nedderman, previously at Pfizer
- Dr Alastair Reith, previously at GlaxoSmithKline
- Dr Klaus Rumpel, previously at Pfizer
- Mr Mathew Sansam, previously at Emote Games Ltd
- Dr David Tattersall, previously at Pfizer
- Mr Toby Underwood, previously at Pfizer
- Professor Wenbin Wang, previously at University of Salford
- Dr Jane Wibley, previously at Syngenta
Editor’s End-Piece

Can I first of all thank those of you who have taken the time to comment on the newsletter, or to offer suggestions on topics for inclusion. My aim is to provide something that is both interesting and useful for you all and this feedback is much appreciated. Please do get in touch if there is something you particularly like, if there is an improvement you would particularly like to see, or if there is some particular topic you would like to see covered.

Over the summer we will be undertaking the first refresh of the college membership and will report the outcome of this in the next issue. We will also shortly be issuing the latest activity reports for members so please do look out for this.

Feedback on this newsletter, on the issues it raises, or on anything relating to your membership of the EPSRC College is welcome and can either be posted for wider debate via the Discussion Forum on the training site at http://www.epsrc.info/ or privately by e-mail to college@epsrc.ac.uk

Editor: Paul Tomsen; College@epsrc.ac.uk

Further Information

Details about EPSRC and the peer review process may be found at http://www.epsrc.ac.uk. EPSRC’s current support may be found through the easily searchable “Grants on the Web” facility at http://gow.epsrc.ac.uk