

MEDICAL RESEARCH COUNCIL



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Trade Union Access: in part

Minutes of the Council business meeting held at the Francis Crick Institute on 10 December 2019

Present:

Council	Head Office staff
Professor Fiona Watt (Executive Chair)	Dr Jennifer Anderson – Item 11
Dr John Brown	Ms Rachel Benny
Dr Roger Highfield	Ms Simone Bryan
Professor John Iredale	Dr Rob Buckle
Professor Jill Pell	Professor Patrick Chinnery
Professor Sir Munir Pirmohamed	Geraldine Clement-Stoneham – Item 6
Professor Eleanor Riley	Ms Sarah Collinge – Item 9
Professor Irene Tracey	Professor Anna Dominiczak
Professor Charlotte Watts	Mr Hugh Dunlop
Dr Pauline Williams	Dr Kristina Harrison – Item 11
Dr Pauline Williams	Mr Steve Oakshott – Item 8
Dr Louise Wood	Dr Frances Rawle
	Dr Frances Rawle
	Dr Nathan Richardson – Item 7
	Dr Susan Simon
UKRI Observers	Ms Heike Weber
Mike Blackburn (item 7)	
Isobel Stephen	Guests
	Geraldine Clement-Stoneham – Item 6
Apologies	David Sweeney – Item 5
Richard Murley – Dialling in for item 7 only.	Duncan Wingham – Item 5
Mene Pangalos – Dialling in for item 7 only.	
Graham Spittle – Dialling in for item 7 only.	

1. Welcome and introductions

Professor Fiona Watt welcomed everyone to the meeting and introduced Isobel Stephen as the senior UKRI observer.

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Mr Richard Murley, Dr Mene Pangalos and Dr Graham Spittle joined the meeting via teleconference for item seven. Professor Eleanor Riley left the meeting after item ten.

2. Register of declared interests

Professor Watt reminded members to notify the secretariat of updates if their declared interests had changed.

3. Minutes of the Council Business Meeting held on 17 October 2019

The minutes of the Council Business Meeting were approved as an accurate record.

4. Finance Report

Mr Hugh Dunlop presented Council with an update on the medium-term financial outlook and the recommended 2020/21 commitment budget, and the year-to-date result to end of October 2019. The medium-term plan models future new award spend against available headroom, (the difference between future available funding and existing commitments). The exercise indicates the shape of the MRC's finances over a medium range (five years); and allows the MRC to determine the level of budget available for new awards in the next financial year. Future year commitment budgets are indicative. A key objective of the medium-term planning has been to avoid large and unexpected fluctuations in the annual commitment budget. As the spend pattern for new awards is uneven the commitment budget is not a tool which can be easily flexed to meet short-term budgetary impacts. A forecast based on the assumption that baseline allocation for the next spending review is unchanged from 2019/20 produces a commitment budget of £320 million. A flat real scenario would create additional headroom.

It was noted that commitment budgets in future years will be subject to the outcome of the Comprehensive Spending Review and subsequent allocations process which is not yet known. Members noted the update and highlighted that in the event of a flat real scenario, then consideration should be given to an uplift for capital spend and the budget for training. Further planning of the commitment budget for 20/21 will be discussed at the March meeting of Council.

5. Update on Plan S and Open Access Review

Professor Watt welcomed David Sweeney, Executive Chair of Research England, and Professor Duncan Wingham, Executive Chair of Natural Environment Research Council, to the meeting. They presented Council with an update on Plan S and the UKRI Open Access (OA) Review.

UKRI has joined cOAlition S, an international consortium of research funders with support of the European Commission and the European Research Council (ERC). The coalition aims to help implement full and immediate Open Access to research publications. The coalition's position is that publications that result from research funded by public grants must be published in compliant OA Journals or on compliant OA Platforms, without embargo, free of charge and with an open licence allowing maximum re-use. The UKRI Open Access Review will provide an opportunity to review effectiveness of existing policies, align policies across UKRI's councils, and to enhance the societal and economic benefits that can be derived from UKRI-funded research through improving access to research outputs. Furthermore, it would provide an opportunity to deliver sustainable support for open access and better value for money. The review is focused on open access to formal scholarly research articles, peer reviewed conference proceedings and monographs.

The objectives for the OA review were outlined and it was confirmed that UKRI will be launching a public consultation on a draft policy, expected to report in 2020, and a separate consultation was being held for Official Development Assistance (ODA) funded research. The MRC was invited to submit evidence to the UKRI consultation. The UKRI review is also engaging fully with government

departments, including the Department of Health and Social Care, and ensuring that Plan S principles are considered as part of the review.

Questions were raised about the barriers to publishing in compliant OA journals or Platforms. Members suggested that more awareness of the current policy was needed and that additional resource within institutions for implementation of the policy could improve compliance rates.

6. Update on Open Access Statistics

Geraldine Clement-Stoneham presented Council with statistics on the number of publications arising from MRC-funded research which are available in Open Access. The MRC introduced its first OA policy mandate in 2006, in alignment with other key biomedical funders in the UK, and some other research councils. This policy was superseded in 2012 with the introduction of the RCUK Policy on Open Access. To support this mandate, RCUK made funding available to universities via an OA block grant. The MRC has maintained a requirement on researchers to archive their papers in Europe PMC (EPMC) within six months of their publication since 2006. In 2012, MRC's Management Board also agreed that MRC's units and Institutes should be incentivised to increase adoption of the policy. A new condition was attached to their funding which required 100 per cent adoption of the policy within five years, or one per cent of their budget would be taken away at their next budget cycle (quinquennial review). They were also advised to earmark enough funding in their budget to cover all publications costs, including OA, and to identify an OA champion in their establishment who would take the lead locally. Since then, most MRC units have transferred to universities, but this requirement remains. The percentage of publications within the scope of the policy shows a significant change from 23 per cent of papers published in 2006 available in EPMC, to 75 per cent published in 2018. A clear policy and a well-structured repository had facilitated compliance.

Challenges encountered in carrying out a detailed analysis of compliance with all aspects of the MRC OA policy were noted, and members agreed it would be useful to further discuss the use of pre-prints at a future meeting.

7. MRC Harwell Strategic Review

Arrangements

Dr John Brown chaired the discussions on behalf of Professor Fiona Watt. Mr Richard Murley and Drs Graham Spittle and Mene Pangalos joined by phone. Mr Mike Blackburn (UKRI Chief Finance Officer) also joined the meeting as an observer. Professor Irene Tracey and Dr Roger Highfield left the room due to conflicts of interest through their links with the University of Oxford. No other conflicts were identified. However, a number of Council members were linked to institutions that could have interest in funding opportunities that might emerge through a new investment model and this was recorded as a general declaration of interest.

Discussions

Professor Watt opened discussions with the background to, and motivations for, the strategic view. She highlighted that it was important and timely to take a broad look at this area of science to shape MRC's long-term plans given Professor Steve Brown's expressed intention to step down as Director of the MRC Harwell Institute and Mammalian Genetics Unit (MGU) in Spring 2020 and the major advancements in the fields of both mouse and human genetics - including the increased sophistication of mouse models of mammalian development and disease, available through genome engineering, and the emergence of rapid and scalable sequencing and phenotyping technologies in humans which provide unprecedented insights into human biology. Professor Watt concluded by highlighting that the MRC supports a large and important portfolio of mouse research, of which the Harwell Institute represents ~7%. Dr Nathan Richardson then briefly summarised the scientific rationale behind the recommendations for a change in strategic investment, the key features of the proposed national network and the proposed timetable for its implementation.

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Dr John Brown then invited Professor Sir Munir Pirmohamed and Professor Eleanor Riley to report the findings from their visit to meet staff representatives at the Institute in November. They highlighted that the views from staff agreed with the key messages presented in the written responses from the Harwell Institute, including: the value of the co-operative relationship between the MGU and the Mary Lyon Centre (MLC); the need for a critical mass of research next to the MLC and strong academic leadership to keep it at the cutting-edge; the extent of the Institute's outreach into UK science and its role in driving the International Mouse Phenotyping Consortium. Staff had also raised a number of concerns regarding the extent of community engagement during the review and the extent of MRC's commitment to enable early career researchers to complete their training should the MGU be closed. Finally, staff had highlighted their view that, should a new network be pursued, any changes to the work at the MGU should not be decided now but once the new network director was in post and had time to consider the broader research network options. Council noted the issues raised and thanked the staff for their warm welcoming of Professor Sir Munir and Professor Riley, and the open and candid discussions.

Discussions were then opened-up to all Council members.

Council welcomed the thoughtful written input from Professor Steve Brown, Dr Sara Wells (MLC Director) and the trade union representatives on behalf of Harwell staff. In addition to the messages from the staff captured above, Professor Steve Brown had highlighted the large number of community responses procured by Harwell over the summer in response to the provisional recommendations from Strategy Board. The letters supported the Harwell position to maintain the status quo of the investment model at Harwell. Council noted that some of the arguments were based on the incorrect belief that the plan was to close all research next to the MLC and incomplete information about how the proposed distributed model would operate. The responders were not, therefore, able to provide cogent arguments as to why the new approach would not be successful. Council agreed that wider perspectives on the shape of future strategic investment from experts on the review panel and Strategy Board gave a clear view on the value of a new network of distributed investments in meeting the need for closer integration with human genomics and disease modelling, and noted that responses from key University partners gave added confidence that this would be successful.

In his written response, Professor Steve Brown also suggested that, in the event that Council decided to endorse Strategy Board's recommendations for change, the decision to close the MGU should be paused and that the new network director be given the authority to define the focus and scale of research next to the MLC. Council agreed that, with substantial change to the nature and scale of research next to the MLC as part of the new model, it was appropriate to take formative action now to close the MGU. This approach would allow the new director to focus on national community engagement and developing the vision for the new network and its research clusters. Members considered that the timetable for taking forward the new plans would allow the MGU investigators to engage with the new director before their MGU funding came to an end, and to explore how their research might contribute to the network ambitions. The transition of investments from the current MGU science to new research in Harwell over the next two years would also sustain activity and expertise in the MGU building and thus an important scientific interface for the MLC during this period of change.

On behalf of Harwell staff, the trade union side also raised concerns over the review process and how it was conducted. Council carefully considered these issues, including engagement between Institute staff and Mr Murley and Mr Blackburn, and agreed that it had been managed appropriately.

Decisions

Council re-emphasized MRC's commitment to supporting mouse-based research. The mouse is a critical experimental tool in biomedicine and remains central to the MRC's strategic ambitions.

Whilst noting the views from Harwell Institute staff, Council agreed that there were compelling strategic arguments to move to a new investment model. Council fully endorsed the recommendations as proposed by Strategy Board.

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In summary, Council decided that:

- future investment should move away from large, hypothesis-free genome-wide programmes in the mouse and focus on more targeted programmes that are integrated with clinical research and link directly to discoveries made in humans, in part through human genomics;
- a new national network of distributed research clusters should be established, with the MLC retained as a central component. The MLC should act as a national hub providing world-class expertise, tools, resources and specialist technologies and services not readily available elsewhere, mouse archiving and distribution, and training. Council highlighted the need to ensure critical staff at MLC are retained to allow it to fulfill its new role;
- the distributed cluster investments should support ambitious, multi-dimensional and thematically-focused research that brings together capabilities spanning mouse genetics, cell and tissue systems, deep phenotyping, and human genomics and pathology in centres of excellence throughout the UK. These investments are likely best positioned within the university environment;
- the network should be developed and led by a new national director with empowered leadership to shape the activities and investments, in consultation with the wider community. The MRC should move forward with an open competition to appoint the national director who could be positioned anywhere within the network. The national director should have overall budget responsibility for the networking activities and all cluster investments and would be expected to work closely with the Director of the MLC;
- the director of the MLC would have an independent budget to pursue the objectives of the MLC;
- the distributed clusters and networking activities should be established over a 12-18 month period and supported through a renewable 5-yearly investment. Council was keen to consider increasing this investment in the event of a favourable UK Government Spending Review outcome in 2020;
- as part of the reconfiguration of MRC support for mouse genetics, the mouse-based research to be continued alongside the MLC should be refocused to capitalize on the specific interdisciplinary opportunities on the wider Harwell campus and complement the distributed clusters;
- accordingly, there was no longer the need to support a large academic research unit on the Harwell campus and the MGU should close at the end of March 2022;
- all new investments should be judged in open competition to maximise the value of the overall network;
- other major mouse research investments (the Laboratory of Molecular Biology, London Institute of Medical Sciences, Frances Crick Institute, and Human Genetics Unit) should link up with the network to maximise national co-operation and availability of mouse models, associated data and best practice.

Council recognised the impact that this decision will have on Harwell staff and emphasised that the MRC will continue to work closely with Harwell leadership and staff during the forthcoming period of change. Council agreed to extend the Harwell Institute core funding by two years until end March 2022 to support the staff and their work during the transition to the new funding structures.

Council reiterated MRC's commitment to ensure that all PhD students complete their pre-doctoral studies and to support the career development of post-docs at Harwell during this transition period. The MRC would also support the group leaders who wished to relocate their research and team to alternative host institutions.

Council noted that Professor Watt and senior staff will visit the Harwell Institute on the 21st January 2020 to meet staff in person to discuss these decisions and the next steps.

8. Experimental Medicine Review

Professor Patrick Chinnery provided Council with an update on plans for the re-organisation and re-packaging of the MRC Clinical and Translational portfolio. A re-organisation would ensure financial

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stability across all clinical – translational programmes, provide a clear and simplified signpost to translational funding, and build a sustainable portfolio of experimental medicine to bridge discovery science into human interventional studies. The reorganisation would comprise a new funding model named the Precision Medicine Accelerator (PMA). The PMA would form a comprehensive funding framework building on existing core MRC translational funding schemes and provide seamless support for interventional research and clinical development, linking the discovery science funded through the research boards, all the way through to early phase clinical trials. Furthermore, it would provide predictable, repeated and consistent opportunities for researchers.

Questions were raised as to how the Efficacy and Mechanism Evaluation (EME) scheme would operate in the new model. Professor Chinnery confirmed that EME is undergoing an independent 10-year Impact Evaluation and the role of EME in the current landscape would be considered as part of this. Council members commented that the schematic used to illustrate the proposed PMA Model should be modified to better convey the translational pathway and how the current process would be repackaged. The schematic should also include reference to the role of charities in supporting translation. The inconsistency of Experimental Medicine Challenge Grant and Precision Medicine Consortia calls, and lack of a dedicated budget had been highlighted as a failure to support pull through of discovery science from NIHR's Biomedical Research Centres. It was agreed that if money was available, the Confidence in Concept and Experimental Medicine schemes should be prioritised and become regular calls to provide consistent funding opportunities for researchers. Members agreed that training and capacity building was important, but this should be kept as a separate activity and supported through schemes such as the Clinical Academic Research Partnerships.

Professor Watt highlighted that there were discussions within UKRI to simplify and harmonise devolved funding activities such as Confidence in Concept and Impact Accelerator Award funding across constituent Councils of UKRI. Members raised concerns that integrating Confidence in Concept calls across UKRI may result in a loss of a focus on healthcare.

Members were supportive of the plans and agreed that, given the successful outputs of its translation schemes, the MRC should look to build on this success to further promote translation as an area where the UK should excel. Members highlighted the need for a clear definition of Experimental Medicine which aligns with definitions used internationally. Council approved the integration of the MRC's clinical and translational portfolio into the 'Precision Medicine Accelerator' scheme.

9. Commitment budget planning

Dr Buckle reminded members that in October, Council discussed how to plan budgets for commitment to new research and noted that Strategy Board was the appropriate forum for initiating discussions on the relative balance of funding streams based upon its view of the science drivers and opportunities. Ideally the proposed budget plan would cover multiple years, however, due to financial constraints and uncertainties it has in recent times only been practical to plan one year ahead, as is proposed this year in light of the stalled Government Spending Review. The budget for financial year 2020/21 was still unknown but level funding would mean a commitment budget for research of £320 million.

Dr Sarah Collinge presented Council with options for the commitment budget plan, including options to increase the budget for training and translation and the option to make a modest over commitment. Mr Dunlop highlighted that if Council chose to overcommit then the MRC would have to be sure the consequences were manageable, and the budget would need to be retrenched in the case of a flat cash scenario. Members agreed that over commitment should be considered in the event of a flat real scenario and that training and translation should be areas of priority, particularly given the demand on the training budget. It was noted that increased investment in training and translation would need to be balanced against a reduction to the research boards budget, which may result in the award rate becoming unacceptably low. As such, members requested that a modified option to increase the budget for training and translation, which minimises the impact on research boards budgets, should

be considered. In the event of a flat real scenario modest increases to budgets could be considered, with proportions reflecting the prioritisation of training and translation.

It was agreed that a modified option to increase the budget for training and translation, and an option to overcommit in the case of a flat real scenario, be prepared for further consideration and final approval at the next meeting in March.

10. Delivery Plan Monitoring Framework

Dr Heike Weber presented Council with a draft monitoring framework for the MRC Delivery Plan. Council Delivery Plans comprise long-term ambitions (LTAs): high level strategic goals for the next five years and near-term actions (NTAs): delivery actions for the 2019/20 financial year. Constituent Councils of UKRI were required to monitor and report progress against their Delivery Plans, which is currently conducted in line with their own processes. It is anticipated that Delivery Plans will be updated after one year, with new short-term actions added for 2020/21. Half way into the reporting period good progress had been made with the majority of actions. Progress has been below expectations in a few areas and this was largely due to lack of funding in the current financial year and uncertainty about future years' funding. A step change in activities was reliant on a positive spending review outcome.

Council agreed the framework provided a valuable tool for monitoring progress against the MRC's Delivery Plan and noted the progress made to date on the near-term actions and long-term ambitions. It was agreed that a progress update should be presented to Council yearly.

11. MRC Doctoral Training Partnership Competition

Drs Jennifer Anderson and Kristina Harrison presented Council with plans for the next MRC Doctoral Training Partnership (DTP) competition. The approach to the 2020 DTP competition had been developed with input from a dedicated working group and agreed by MRC's Training and Careers Group, Strategy Board and Management Board. Key features were a more open competition to provide the opportunity to fund wider doctoral training across the medical research community, and studentship funding based on a 4-year studentship norm rather than the current 3.5-years, bringing the MRC in line with the rest of the sector. Industrial Collaborative Awards in Science and Engineering (iCASE) students, currently allocated through a separate devolved competition, would now be funded as part of the DTPs. The doctoral training partnership supplement (a flexible supplement to support unique training opportunities for MRC-funded PhD students) would be embedded within awards from the outset.

Council noted and approved the plans for the next MRC Doctoral Training Partnership Competition.

12. Board Chair Appointment

Dr Rob Buckle introduced this item and explained that the MRC is seeking to appoint a new Research Board Chair from 1 April 2020 to replace Professor Paul Elliott, current Chair of the Population & Systems Medicine Board. Following interviews an offer has been made to Professor Brian Walker, Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research Strategy and Resources, at Newcastle University. Dr Buckle clarified that the vice-chancellors of the top 25 universities in receipt of MRC funding were written to, informing them of the vacancy and inviting nominations. However, this process had failed to identify suitable female candidates. The MRC's board and panels membership was 42 per cent female, but three of the four current Research Board Chairs were male.

Members made a number of suggestions to help encourage more applications from female candidates including, the possibility of virtual or remote meetings, making clear to Research Organisations that applications from female candidates were particularly welcome and increasing the amount of time the vacancies were advertised for to allow researchers with multiple commitments time to plan how these commitments could be managed should they be successful.

The appointment was approved.

13. Updates from the Executive

Professor Watt introduced this item and informed Council that the updates provided within the paper were for information.

Council noted an update on the building project for the London Institute for Medical Sciences (LMS). Defects of the Prion Unit building had been rectified and it was confirmed the facility is safe to operate. Council was notified of the gateway five review for the Francis Crick Institute and the establishment reviews of the Dementia Research Institute and Health Data Research UK.

12. Any other business and close

Professor Watt reminded Council members that the next meeting on 3 March 2020 would be held at University of Manchester and include a working dinner hosted by Dame Nancy Rothwell.

13. Council private business

Following the meeting members held a private business meeting.