

Summary of MRC Unit and Institute Quinquennial Reviews

The MRC carries out scientific reviews in order to be assured of:

- the overall quality, impact, and productivity (past and future potential) of the Institutes/Units research programmes and the Institute/Unit as a whole;
- the distinctive contribution of the Institute/Unit to MRC's research portfolio, strategic aims and the wider research effort;
- the added value from the Institute/Units structure;
- the future form of support that is the most appropriate for MRC's needs ([see MRC's policy for supporting Institutes, Institute/Units and Centres – attached](#))
- the future resources required.

These reviews take place every five years and for this reason are known as Quinquennial Reviews (**QQRs**). The process is adapted to reflect the role and strategy of each Unit, but normally assesses the Institute/Unit overall through its individual scientific programmes, as well as looking at Institute/Unit wide themes (e.g. knowledge transfer, training communications) and the added value and strategic direction of the whole. The added research value of the MRC-University partnership is also evaluated.

The Subcommittee will normally be chaired by the Board Chair (or the MRC Chief Executive Officer for Institutes) and include Board Members, independent National and International Experts, a Senior Research Leader from a MRC Institute or Unit and a MRC Management Board Member.

The generic terms of reference for the Subcommittee (adapted to specific reviews as needed) are:

- To assess the overall quality, impact, and productivity (past and future potential) of the Institutes/Units research programmes and the Institute/Institute/Unit as a whole.
- To consider if, and how, the Institute/Unit continues to make a distinctive contribution to the UK research portfolio addressing a substantial strategic and long-term need.
- To consider if there is demonstrable added value from Institute/Unit support or could equally or more productive research be achieved in other ways e.g. Centre or Programme Grant support, or through improved Institute/Unit-University links including
 - the strength of commitment from the University and fit to University strategy;
 - partnership and integration with other local stakeholders.
- To assess the Institute/Unit's role in:
 - translating its research into health, societal or economic benefits;
 - knowledge transfer;
 - training, career development and capacity building;
 - public engagement.
- To assess the value for money provided by the Institute/Institute/Unit – taking account of all resources and space - and provide recommendations on whether the work of the Institute/Unit should continue, and if so on what scale, including:
 - the management of the Institute/Unit and its core facilities;
 - the level of infrastructure support to underpin the research activities.
- Advise on realistic expectations for the development of the Institute/Unit's work over the next five years and on key performance indicators against which the Institute/Unit may be monitored through the annual reporting process or/and at the next scientific review.
- To report back to the Board.

Major stages of the MRC scientific (QQR) review

About 18 months before the end of the Institute/Unit award, MRC Head Office will have a preliminary meeting with the Director to agree a timeline, scope etc., and also discuss this with the Host University.

The assessment of the Unit's work and decisions on future direction and support are completed within 9 months of the Director submitting their report. This is normally 3 months before the start of the next budget period, to allow time for budget setting or other post-review work to be completed.

Institute Reviews take longer since their science is reviewed first (to a similar time line as a Unit review) followed by the overall Institute Review (which is completed within 5 months of the Director submitting the Institute report and 3 months before the start of the next budget period).

1. Submission of an Institute/Institute/Unit Report (previous 5 years outputs and achievements and plans for the next 5 years)

This is usually submitted 12 months before the end of the funding period. Contents of the report include:

- Overview (mission, past and future strategy & vision and how this maps onto MRC and University strategies, distinctiveness, key outputs & achievements, added value and key expectations/objectives for the next five years);
- Individual Programmes (past 5 years work and proposals for the next 5 years);
- Resources – review of past usage and what is needed to deliver the planned future work including use of animals and data management;
- Institute/Unit-wide Research Areas (Knowledge Transfer; Training Career Development & Capacity Building, Public Engagement).

2. Peer Review

UK and International referees comments are sought plus stakeholder input as appropriate.

3. First Subcommittee Meeting (0.5 – 1 day at MRC Head Office, London)

- Ensures everyone knows what is expected of them;
- Explores Institute/Unit mission & strategy, distinctiveness and added value;
- Preliminary assessment of all the programmes;
- Reviews documents to ensure the Subcommittee has sufficient information to make an informed assessment at the second meeting at the Unit.

4. Second Subcommittee Meeting (2 days at the Institute/Unit)

- Explore past five years and plans for the future with the Institute/Unit Director, Programme Leads, University Representatives and key stakeholder(s) - this will include a specific session on the scientific values gained and the scientific opportunities from the Host University and will involve senior members of the Host University;
- Score individual programmes of work, research-wide areas (knowledge transfer; training, career development & capacity building; and public engagement) and the Institute/Unit overall;
- Make recommendations for the future strategic direction, form of support and funding envelope appropriate to deliver the science;
- Review and comment on the proposed key objectives for the next 5 years;

- Produce immediate feedback at the end of the visit.

5. Subcommittee Report (usually agreed and issued within 4 weeks of the visit)

A full report is produced after the second Subcommittee meeting at the Unit including recommendations to the Board on the future strategic direction, quality of the science, value for money, future funding form and funding envelope. The Institute/Unit, via the Director, has an opportunity to respond to this full report.

6. Board Assessment (in the last financial year of the current funding envelope)

The Board assessment, based on the expert assessments and responses:

- Considers the overall value and impact of the Unit in the context of other MRC research, and current competitive funding standards and strategic priorities.
- Considers the future strategy, confirms the quality of the science and value for money assessments and that the future form of support is appropriate for the MRC;
- Recommends to Management Board the future key objectives and funding envelope for the next five years.

7. Management Board / Council

The implications of the review for budgets and staff (if any) are discussed at Management Board (and Council if needed).

Review outcomes are always reported to Council, and major scientific changes may be referred to Council for final approval.

Version Control

The MRC will keep the arrangements for QQRs under review. Where there are proposals to amend the process, this will be discussed with MRC Directors and the Trade Unions as part of the consultation process before making final changes.

Version	Date of Document	Approved by	Changes
1.0	April 2011	Management Board	
1.1	October 2012	Management Board	Minor updates to second subcommittee meeting and subcommittee report paragraphs

MRC policy for supporting Institutes, Units and Centres (Approved by Council in December 2010)

The MRC has a mission to support research and training with the aim of maintaining and improving human health. The usual support mechanisms are Programme and Project Grants awarded to UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The MRC has a range of other mechanisms, used when there is a need for more concerted action to address important scientific opportunities and health needs and stand-alone grant support alone is insufficient. These are:

- Institutes - very long-term flexible multidisciplinary investments
- Units - more focussed investments established for as long as needed to support a scientific need and/ or deliver a research vision
- Centres - build on existing MRC and other support to add value and help establish a centre of excellence.

Strategically driven initiatives, led by an expert scientific director, can help promote novel, high risk approaches, cooperative research programmes, or the development of shared infrastructure. These are key elements of the UK effort in their particular fields.

The MRC's main support mechanisms here are Institutes, Units and Centres. All three are mission-focused and carry out ground-breaking research including innovative methodology and technology development. They are expected to recruit and, in partnership with the HEIs and other organisations, develop outstanding researchers with specialist and transferable skills for academic research, the health services and the national economy. They work in partnerships to ensure maximal knowledge transfer for health benefit. Institutes and Units are often preferred when the MRC intends to be the keystone of support for a particular area. Centres are usually set up to provide the core for developing initiatives in partnership with others.

In any field, the need for these support mechanisms will change over time. In some cases, success will manifest as approaches are quickly integrated into HEI research in the area. In other cases, successful research progress may mean a Unit or Centre has to change its form and direction.

Units and Institutes may be based on MRC or non-MRC employment models according to the setting. All new Units are embedded as fully as possible in a research-active University. In either case support is only justified if a suitable high quality research Director can be found.

Institutes

Institutes are charged with adopting broad multidisciplinary approaches to address major challenges in health-related research often requiring ground breaking methodology and technology development. They are provided with sustained support and state-of-the-art facilities over a long period of time.

They are therefore able to use highly innovative and risky approaches across a flexible range of disciplines that would not be feasible in a university setting, to tackle crucially important and complex issues over long periods of time.

Institutes attract and develop outstanding students and early career scientists from the UK and internationally, providing in-depth, advanced research training, and a broad multidisciplinary research environment.

Units

Units are set up to meet specific needs, for example, to provide scientific leadership in key research fields, or to tackle important research questions where the need cannot easily be addressed through grant funding. This can be because the research area calls for: strong and distinctive scientific leadership; close coordination across disciplines and activities; development of methods and technologies; and support for the development of novel or higher risk programmes and capabilities.

Units attract and develop outstanding students and early career programme leaders from the UK and internationally, and often have a major impact through developing future research leaders in their specialist areas.

There is no set limit on the lifespan of a Unit but Units often make their major impact in the field within 15 years, with their successful approaches and lines of investigation increasingly integrated into HEI research in the field.

Units may be supported through HEI employment, or MRC employment, but the expectations of their scientific mission, distinctiveness, role of director, and research productivity are the same in both models.

Centres

Centres allow the MRC to help HEIs develop and consolidate internationally competitive, high-profile centres of excellence with a clear strategic direction in areas of importance for UK medical research. They provide intellectually stimulating and well-resourced programmes and environments which not only are attractive to established researchers but also to new investigators.

Centres, like Units and Institutes, have an important role in capacity development in a focussed area, with MRC's funding for training often focussed at the PhD and individual fellowship level, in both clinical and non-clinical research.

MRC core funding is provided for a set period to develop the centre's capabilities and research strategy, and is expected to help HEIs attract further support from other funders as well as MRC.