

ERA Framework Public Consultation: Areas of untapped potential for the development of the European Research Area

Evidence from the Russell Group of Universities

Introduction

1. The Russell Group is pleased to have the opportunity to contribute evidence to the public consultation on areas of untapped potential for the development of the European Research Area framework.

2. The Russell Group and Europe

- 2.1 The Russell Group is an association of 20 major UK research-intensive universities.¹ They are highly involved in Europe, with 33,000 students and over 14,000 staff from elsewhere in the EU.² Our universities also contribute significantly to EU research and innovation activity.³
- 2.2 Russell Group universities are leading contributors to Europe's strengths in higher education and research. They are important collaborators for many European research partners.⁴ The combination of high quality teaching in Russell Group universities creates an ideal learning environment for the next generation of researchers. They are multi-disciplinary centres of excellence with the critical mass to engage with international partners, business and policy makers.

3. Context

- 3.1 The Commission recognises the contribution of research and innovation to sustainable growth and jobs and to Europe's long term competitiveness in an increasingly global knowledge economy. Leading universities contribute to economic prosperity and innovation by combining world-class research, excellent teaching and strong links with business, public services and the community. Ground breaking research conducted in Russell Group universities has resulted in far-reaching benefits shared by businesses, government, and citizens.⁵ Research-intensive universities and researchers across

¹ Russell Group members are listed in the annex. For more information see www.russellgroup.ac.uk

² This represents 55% of the UK's PhD students, 46% of UK higher education staff and 70% of research- only staff from elsewhere in the EU. Higher Education Statistics Agency 2009-10.

³ The UK has the largest higher education sector involvement in research and innovation in Europe through the Framework Programme, the majority of this through Russell Group universities. 13 of the top 50 academic institution recipients of Framework Programme 7 funding, and all the UK institutions in the top 50, are Russell Group universities. *Fourth FP7 Monitoring Report*, August 2011

⁴ The 2008 Research Assessment Exercise found that over 60% of the UK's very best research took place in Russell Group universities.

⁵ See *The economic impact of research conducted in Russell Group universities*, 2010. With just 12% of all UK higher education institutions in the Russell Group, we generate 68% of all business and

Europe must be enabled to play their central role in the ERA in order for Innovation Union and Europe 2020 to succeed and to achieve smart growth and jobs. Appropriately supported, leading universities have the potential to act as role models and valued partners to universities across Europe.

- 3.2 EU funding has contributed significantly to what has been achieved in the ERA so far. The improvements introduced in FP7 through the Ideas programme (ERC) and increased support for the People programme (Marie Curie actions) are particularly attractive to leading researchers because they focus on excellence and should have a higher priority in Horizon 2020. To achieve Europe's research potential, resources - both national and EU – must be focused on excellence and critical mass to compete with and build collaborative relationships with the most selective partners worldwide.
- 3.3 The effectiveness of the EU's overall contribution to research and innovation could be enhanced by a greater use of Structural funding to support learning, research and innovation. This can help to develop new connections and centres of excellence across Europe's nations and regions. Horizon 2020 and Education Europe will add most value by targeting their dedicated purposes and focussing on excellence in allocating limited resources rather than geographic distribution.

4. Researchers

- 4.1 High quality postgraduate education is essential to the supply of new researchers and to provide the innovation and knowledge which is vital in a 21st century economy. The learning and research environment at Russell Group universities is attractive to postgraduates from the UK and across Europe.⁶ High-quality doctoral programmes are characterised by interdisciplinary collaboration, workplace experience, and high-quality transferable skills training. We support the EU's call in the Principles on Innovative Doctoral Training, for research excellence and "an attractive institutional environment with critical mass". Expansion of the number of research students at the expense of the quality of learning and student experience may not deliver economic and social benefits. The ability to produce excellent research is highly dependent on a critical mass of research capability. Given limited resources, available funding should be targeted at those institutions most capable of delivering the very best research and postgraduate provision.
- 4.2 Russell Group universities provide a high quality research environment that is attractive to research staff from around the world.⁷ Russell Group universities host excellent researchers from outside the UK supported by Marie Curie actions and the ERC. This demonstrates the attractiveness of Russell Group universities to researchers at all career stages and the fact that relatively small amounts of funding can achieve significant mobility when it is focused on excellence. The free movement of ERA researchers with sustainable funding is likely to increase the overall quality of research in Europe. Intervention to ensure "symmetry" may distort the movement of

charity income in the UK sector. Estimated annual turnover from companies 'spun out' from Russell Group universities was 70% of the total for the whole of the UK higher education sector

⁶ Russell Group universities are educating nearly 50,000 postgraduate research students, more than half of all UK postgraduate research students whether Home, EU or non-EU.

⁷ Over 20% of Russell Group staff, and over 40% of research only staff, are from outside the UK.

researchers and ideas and may in the long term harm the research potential of all countries.⁸

- 4.3 Consideration of career structures should focus where there is evidence of real issues and acknowledge the diversity between national research bases to maintain flexibility to innovate.⁹ More than half of Russell Group universities have already gained the HR in Research Excellence badge acknowledging their commitment to good management of researchers and the principles of European Charter for Researchers and Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers and identifying them as providers and supporters of a stimulating and favorable working environment. Increased support for mobility between academia and industry, public services and civil society would enable Russell Group universities to strengthen their links with business across Europe.
- 4.4 Proposals on EU researcher pensions require careful consideration. Any arrangements to address areas where the attractiveness and portability of pensions are barriers to research careers and mobility must complement and work with existing high quality schemes. Pension provision in the UK for university academics through the University Superannuation Scheme is an important and attractive part of researchers' reward. Maintaining its long term sustainability is a priority for us. The Commission should acknowledge this and work with major employers on its pan-European proposals to ensure that details, in any new scheme (such as transferability options) are appropriate and mobile researchers are well-informed about the benefits of existing provision.
- 4.5 There is a fierce global market for the best academic talent, and while the UK is not part of the EU scientific visa package, the Russell Group engages in frequent dialogue with the Government here to try to ensure that our ability to attract the best students is not harmed by the visa system.

5. Cross border operation of research funding organisations

- 5.1 The cross border operation of research funders should aim to add value to leading researchers and research centres so that European research can fulfil its world-class potential. The greater alignment of national resources and/or greater cross border operation would be welcome if it genuinely adds benefit to institutions like ours which are centres of international excellence in research. Harmonisation of research agendas and participation in cross border funding arrangements will need to be attractive to member states and to researchers from the most research-intensive universities in Europe.¹⁰

⁸ Analysis of citation data for the UK research base shows the country is a beneficiary in research productivity from "brain circulation" with very little long term change in the net number of researchers through international mobility. Report prepared for BIS, *International Comparative Performance of the UK Research Base 2011*.

⁹ The European Framework for Research Careers needs to be able to describe what researchers can do, both inside and outside of higher education, while respecting the autonomy of universities and academics. In Doctoral education, the third cycle in the Bologna process, leading UK universities have good practice to share but doctoral programmes should not be over regulated.

¹⁰ Funding to incentivise cross border operation where this does not create a higher value package for leading research institutions is not the most effective use of public resources. It may reduce the integration of the best researchers and institutions and so hinder deeper coordination in the long run if the terms are not attractive to the best institutions or the countries they are based in are unable to play a full part.

- 5.2 How cross border operation is achieved may be more important than a set quantity or budget share. The research systems of different ERA countries are highly varied. The Russell Group would be concerned about any cross border operations which in effect reduced the proportion of the full economic cost of research supported through research funding programmes.¹¹ Competition on the basis of excellence, responsiveness to bottom up initiatives, and academic freedom in selecting the highest quality research partners are needed to maintain the intellectual sustainability of the best European research. Peer-reviewed quality should be paramount. Cross border operations which constrain domestic funding to narrow themes could reduce the focus on quality. Common processes should be simple and the administrative burden as light as possible and for collaboration to add value, researchers should be free to find the most suitable partners.

6. Research infrastructures

- 6.1 Decisions on new infrastructure investments need to balance priority infrastructure with sustainable resource funding for researchers and high quality projects. Increased EU research and innovation funding could be complemented by increased use of Coherence funding for research infrastructure beyond the scope of any one country. When Member States update national research infrastructure policies, they should consider including provision for other researchers to access infrastructures on the basis of research excellence.

7. Knowledge transfer

- 7.1 Russell Group universities are highly effective and successful in the commercial exploitation of their research.¹² Many are recognised as world leaders and may provide models for knowledge transfer in other parts of the EU.¹³ However, the gains are predominantly to the economy not the university, and there are critically important innovation-related activities such as proof-of-concept, which continue to lack sufficient policy support. National policy on knowledge exchange should be based on sound evidence and robust data.¹⁴ Analysis of knowledge exchange should include the many ways in which economic impact is generated, and not be limited to formal Intellectual Property protection and spin outs.¹⁵

¹¹ Different funding regimes across Europe provide different proportions of the full cost of research and due attention should be paid to maintaining the research infrastructure of our centres of international excellence which are the most attractive host institutions.

¹² For data and many examples see the Russell Group's *The Economic Impact of Research at Russell Group universities*, 2010.

¹³ Experts from Russell Group universities provide advice on research commercialisation in over 50 countries. Academics at Russell Group institutions are more likely to have taken out a patent, licensed their research to a company or formed a spin-out than academics at other UK institutions. Abreu, Grinevich, Kitson, and Hughes, *Knowledge Exchange between Academics and the Business, Public and Third Sectors*, 2010.

¹⁴ Comparable data at a European scale should build on the UK Higher Education Business and Community Interaction survey, possibly the most comprehensive current data set.

¹⁵ Many of the greatest economic and social impacts from ground breaking research are indirect and long term. Income from IP is only a few percent of the value of university-business interactions (Higher Education Business Community Interaction Survey).

- 7.2 It would not be appropriate or effective for the EU to legislate on knowledge exchange or to make guidelines binding.¹⁶ Autonomous universities have the responsibility to set their own knowledge exchange strategies and innovate to maximise public benefit based on their individual strengths and partnerships.¹⁷ Public resources for knowledge exchange should be concentrated on highly performing institutions where the public return on investment is higher and institutions have the expertise and critical mass of excellent research to attract globally mobile investments.
- 7.3 Russell Group universities make significant efforts to promote access to the outcomes of their excellent research and the realisation of benefits to society. Universities, as autonomous public benefit institutions, are best placed to decide how to make research data available to researchers and other users in business, government and public services in order to maximise public benefit.¹⁸

8. International dimension

- 8.1 Russell Group universities benefit from partnerships in research and teaching with institutions around the world.¹⁹ Links range hugely from co-authorship between individual researchers to large scale partnerships with world leading institutions and multi-national companies. Many require dedicated and flexible funding from national or European sources to enable collaboration to bear fruit. International strategies (state and European), financial and diplomatic resource should support cooperation where international centres of excellence themselves select partners for mutual benefit, rather than for the sake of coordination alone. Information sharing and strong engagement with leading research-intensive universities will be important in determining where partnership and coordination adds value. A priority for the Russell Group is to ensure that any common strategy or representation to third countries enhances and does not constrain the competitiveness of institutions such as ours, which are already highly internationalized, within the EU.²⁰ Any measures designed to make it easier for researchers to access infrastructure in other countries should be on the basis of research excellence and critical mass.
- 8.2 The most important factors in the global attractiveness of the ERA will be the quality of European research, openness to and the simplicity of collaboration and the concentration of research in institutions with critical mass, interdisciplinary strength and the autonomy to enter into long term strategic relationships.

9. Managing and monitoring

- 9.1 For the ERA to function well, there will need to be a substantial increase in the involvement and influence of leading research-intensive universities in the process.

¹⁶ The UK experience of supporting and incentivising universities through Higher Education Innovation Funding (HEIF) on the basis of their performance through their own strategies helped university-business interaction more than double in real terms in ten years.

¹⁷ UK Intellectual Property Office, *Intellectual Asset Management for Universities*, 2011.

¹⁸ All our members have institutional repositories and work with research funders on open access.

¹⁹ The UK has the most non-EU Doctoral students in Europe and the UK's rate of international co-authorship is high and rising at 46% with more internationally co-authored research papers than any other country in Europe. *Innovation Union Competitiveness report 2011*.

²⁰ For example by setting common terms for Intellectual Property which are less attractive than those they have through their own ventures or undermining existing long term strategic relationships.

They have a critical role to play in designing the research agendas, processes, and objectives which will directly affect them. We would encourage the Commission to engage with research-intensive universities and their several representative bodies as the ERA develops.

- 9.2 We support the principles the Commission enumerated of non-discrimination, equal opportunities, transparency, subsidiarity and proportionality and also support low administrative burden, scientific autonomy, integrity, earning public trust, and especially gender equality.

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Annex

Russell Group Universities

University of Birmingham
University of Bristol
University of Cambridge
Cardiff University
University of Edinburgh
University of Glasgow
Imperial College London
King's College London
University of Leeds
University of Liverpool
London School of Economics & Political Science
University of Manchester
Newcastle University
University of Nottingham
University of Oxford
Queen's University Belfast
University of Sheffield
University of Southampton
University College London
University of Warwick