

EVALUATION OF BBSRC'S BIOCHEMISTRY AND CELL BIOLOGY COMMITTEE RESPONSIVE MODE PORTFOLIO 2006

BBSRC RESPONSE TO THE PANEL'S REPORT

This document sets out BBSRC's response to the findings of the Review Panel convened to provide an independent scientific evaluation of the research supported in responsive mode through BBSRC's Biochemistry and cell Biology Committee (BCB) since the Committee's inception in 1994.

BBSRC thanks the Panel members for their hard work and commitment to this exercise. We are pleased to note the Panel's views that the research outputs from the grants funded by BCB have been generally good and include some outstanding achievements. The remainder of this document sets out our response to the Panel's key conclusions.

Key conclusion: The impact of research supported through BCB could be significantly improved by moving to a more balanced funding model aimed at encouraging the continuity and stability of research and research groups (i.e. supporting a greater proportion of longer and larger grants).

The need to reconsider the balance of BBSRC's funding between longer, larger awards and the more usual three-year awards in the BCB and other areas is recognised and accepted by BBSRC's Strategy Board. BBSRC is working to encourage the UK biosciences community to apply for longer, larger grants, through a specific mechanism (http://www.bbsrc.ac.uk/science/areas/crosscommittee/multidisciplinary_programmes.html), and by increasing the community's awareness of the benefits that may be achieved from a shift towards more consolidated funding.

Key conclusion: BBSRC and Research Councils UK (RCUK) should continue to identify ways in which it can contribute to improving job security, benefits and career prospects for research staff.

We agree that these are serious issues that must be addressed. Research Councils UK (RCUK) leads for the Research Councils in this area. Activities include:

- the current work to revise the 1996 Concordat for contract research staff career development and replace it with a Code of Practice
- developing a new web-based careers resource for postdoctoral researchers and PhD students
- providing Academic Fellowships, which aim to create a clearer pathway into academic research.

RCUK has recently published *Research careers: a strategy for success* (see <http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/rescareer/strategy.htm>) which sets out further plans.

In addition, BBSRC is developing a broad Human Resources Strategy for BBSRC, which will cover the responsibilities of PIs in Universities to the staff funded on BBSRC grants. We also hold an annual 'Next Generation' conference which aims to inform our PhD students and postdocs of the broad range of research careers open to them - both inside and beyond academia.

Key conclusion: BBSRC should investigate the apparent gaps in support for the development of bioinformatic tools for research at the cellular level, for cutting edge technologies (including imaging and 'omics technologies) within BCB's remit, and for transgenic animal research. Should these gaps be real, the Council should take steps to increase its support for research in these areas.

The remit and coverage of the BCB portfolio are regularly reviewed by the BCB Committee. The Committee will continue to fund grants utilising bioinformatic tools and cutting edge technologies, however, development of these is supported through the BBSRC Tools and Resources Programme and the EBS Committee, it is therefore not within the BCB remit. All responsive mode research committees have at least one member with bioinformatics or e-science expertise. A Bioinformatics Co-ordination Group (which includes these committee members) monitors the number and success rates of relevant proposals and provides input to BBSRC policy on bioinformatics related issues.

In relation to transgenic animal research, the Committee is of the opinion that the current level of support provided is adequate, but will continue to monitor this situation in the future.

Key conclusion: BBSRC should clarify the role and significance of Priority Areas to the community. The term priority should be changed, for example, to "highlight", to dispel the notion that applications in these areas are treated preferentially.

Priority areas represent focused areas where BBSRC wishes to encourage more applications. They are used to help the community respond to changes in requirements for research and skills in each Committee area. However, quality of science remains the key criterion for BBSRC funding, and BBSRC continues to welcome responsive mode applications across its full remit. This message will be reinforced in future communications with the research community. The Panel's recommendation on the term used, and the alternative suggestions of the BCB Committee ('development area' and 'directional area'), will be taken forward by Chairs of the Research Committees.

Key conclusion: BBSRC should continue its efforts to promote interaction with industry, particularly through brokering contacts between industry and researchers.

Encouraging interaction between research and industry is a key priority for BBSRC, and we recently pledged to double the amount that we invest in collaborative grants by 2007/08. Our Bioscience for Industry Strategy Panel regularly reviews BBSRC's support in this area and identifies ways in which BBSRC can make a difference in this field. Wider promotion of Industrial Partnership Awards, a scheme designed specifically to encourage academic/industrial research collaborations that address any area of BBSRC's science remit, is increasing the number and quality of grant applications with an industrial contribution.

Key conclusion: While the importance for public engagement is now widely accepted, BBSRC should continue to seek opportunities to encourage and facilitate bioscientists to engage with the public.

BBSRC is committed to making information about the biosciences widely available and responding to issues of public concern and making sure our processes are transparent to the public. We encourage public debate about potential applications and implications of BBSRC-sponsored research through:

- Exhibitions, discussion documents, schools & young people, public engagement grants, media relations
- Discussion meetings, consultations, public attitudes
- Annual report & accounts, position statements, evidence to inquiries, open meetings, funding breakdown, complaints procedure
- Seeking expert advice from our Biosciences for Society Strategy Panel on integrating public attitudes into policy and planning and on our public engagement programme.