

EVALUATION OF THE BBSRC AGRI-FOOD COMMITTEE RESPONSIVE MODE PORTFOLIO 2007

BBSRC RESPONSE TO THE PANEL'S REPORT

This is the response of BBSRC to the findings of the review panel convened to provide an independent scientific evaluation of the research supported in responsive mode through the BBSRC Agri-Food Committee between 1996 and 2006.

BBSRC would like to thank the Panel members for their hard work and commitment to this exercise. We are pleased to note the Panel's views that overall the quality of the science funded through the Agri-Food Committee was good, with some excellent examples, and that there were many examples of meaningful interactions with industry and other users. The remainder of this document sets out BBSRC's response to the Panel's key conclusions.

Key conclusion: The overall quality of the research funded by the Agri-Food Committee is generally good with some excellent examples. However, inferior quality work which resulted in weak publications, or in some cases no publications, was identified in some areas. BBSRC must continue to support the strategically important agricultural, and food sciences; and to encourage scientifically-sound, high-risk work. More rigorous scrutiny of some applications and final reports would be beneficial.

Funding international quality science is BBSRC's primary function and BBSRC will continue to seek ways to ensure this high level is maintained. BBSRC is committed to supporting all areas of its remit, including the strategically important areas of agricultural and food sciences, and this will continue to be the case in any future structure. Processes for the scrutiny of grant applications are kept under regular review and final reporting procedures are about to be considered in detail by the Research Councils UK (RCUK) research outputs and outcomes collection project. The Evaluation Panel's views are informing both sets of discussion.

Key conclusion: Staff recruitment and retention difficulties, and skills shortages have had detrimental impacts on the quality of research produced. Computing, mathematical and physiological skills are particularly scarce, as are staff trained to work with all types of weeds and crop pests (arthropods, nematodes and pathogens). BBSRC should take action to reverse these shortages and work with other funders and HEIs to address long term career issues faced by research assistants, support staff and post doctoral students.

BBSRC is currently working with RCUK to address issues of staff retention and recruitment. RCUK has published *Research Careers: a strategy for success* (see www.rcuk.ac.uk/rescareer/strategy.htm) which sets out the ways in which the research councils are seeking to influence the career development of researchers and the attractiveness of research career paths. A key aim in this strategy is the revision of the 1996 Concordat to produce a comprehensive code of practice for employers and funders on the management and development of research staff, and significant progress has been made in developing the revised Concordat. BBSRC has also developed a Human Resources Strategy which gives details of the responsibilities of our grantholders to the staff funded on their grants. New guidance for grant applicants on how to request appropriate postdoctoral salaries is currently

being formulated with the aim of alleviating the difficulties of recruiting and retaining the best researchers.

In relation to physiology, BBSRC is part of a consortium of funders, including other Research Councils, Funding Councils and industry, which has invested over £10m in the research initiative Integrative Mammalian Biology, one of the key aims of which is to build UK research capacity in whole animal physiology.

BBSRC is also funding Masters courses in mathematics and computational science, encouraging university departments to include modules on mathematics within four-year Doctoral Training Grants, contributing funding to discipline hopping awards run by EPSRC and MRC, and running mathematics summer schools.

Key conclusion: BBSRC should reconsider its decision to discontinue the Agri-Food Committee. Although in some areas of the remit demand for funding from the Agri-Food Committee over the period of this evaluation has fallen, the Panel felt that proceeding with the proposed committee restructuring will have detrimental effects on many areas of the Agri-Food remit. While some aspects of Agri-Food research can be relatively easily accommodated within the remit of other committees, many cannot. These include: human studies in relation to diet; food quality; economic, social, and environmental aspects of sustainability of agricultural systems; the safety of food materials through the food chain; agricultural livestock; environmental protection and change; soil science; and interdisciplinary research.

Key conclusion: Should BBSRC decide to continue with the proposed committee restructuring it must ensure that all areas of the Agri-Food remit are found appropriate homes and/or alternative mechanisms of funding in the revised committee structure. In addition, each committee would need to draw on a specialist pool of expertise from the Agri-Food community to supplement the core expertise of the committee.

BBSRC is continuing to review how its remit can best be represented in terms of numbers and coverage of Committees. The Panel's comments are being taken into account, and the earlier proposal to reduce the number of committees from seven to six, discontinuing the AF Committee, is being reconsidered.

Key conclusion: It was felt that the Diet and Health, and Food Quality areas have been appropriately supported by the Agri-Food Committee, but that some areas of agriculture have been inadequately addressed. BBSRC needs to take account of the lack of support felt by members of the agricultural, and food science communities, and take steps to reverse this trend. To this end BBSRC should consult with the community in the restructuring process and use incentives to encourage applications in these areas.

BBSRC is pleased to note the Panel's views on the Committee's support for research into diet and health, and food quality. In relation to the reported lack of support felt by members of the agricultural and food science communities, and future committee structures, BBSRC has already consulted widely on these issues and will endeavour to ensure that all bioscience and related research communities are kept informed of developments. The particular issues on Committee restructuring raised by the Panel have already been fed into on-going discussions.

Key conclusion: Given the end-user orientation of much of the Agri-Food research, the panel felt that there is considerable scope for a more joined up strategy with other funders (e.g. FSA, MRC and Defra) than there is at present. This would facilitate interdisciplinary research and better end-user outcomes.

BBSRC is fully committed to funding interdisciplinary research and is considering how the level of cross-council communication might be improved. This will include closer liaison with the other research councils that fund science relevant to agriculture and food. In addition, BBSRC recognises both the importance of its current links with government departments and other funding agencies, and that good communication and strategy between all stakeholders of the agricultural and food sciences is important, to maximise the scientific and economic impact of research funded.

Key conclusion: Overall the Panel was pleased with the level of interaction between Agri-Food-supported research and industry. However, it felt that there was potential for more involvement in the future. To achieve this BBSRC may wish to publicise the research it supports more widely, for example in user-focused media, and seek feedback from current collaborators about the benefits of working with BBSRC-funded researchers and how to encourage further interactions.

Encouraging interaction between research and industry is a key priority for BBSRC and we are pleased to see the schemes and programmes designed to facilitate these interactions are having such an impact. BBSRC has already met its commitment to double its investment in collaborative grants by 2007-08, and is seeking ways further to encourage collaborations between the researchers it supports and industry. The level of user involvement in and awareness of BBSRC-funded research is monitored closely by the BBSRC's strategy panels, in particular the Bioscience for Industry Panel and, for this area of research, the Sustainable Agriculture Panel. This conclusion will be referred to relevant Strategy Panels for further consideration.

Key conclusion: The science covered by the Agri-Food Committee remit is of high public interest and much of it is comparatively accessible to the lay person. However, the time and financial costs associated with public engagement activities often conflict with the research priorities of the PI. For this reason BBSRC should investigate institutionally-led and/or cross-funding body organisational support for these activities, and the possibility of declaring costs and allocating this money, from the outset as part of FEC calculations.

BBSRC is committed to encouraging our grantholders to engage with the public, and requires that 1-2 days per year of the grant is spent on these activities. We provide a wide range of mechanisms to assist grantholders with this commitment, including funding schemes, web-based resources and communications training. We also participate in a range of cross-Council schemes to which our grantholders can apply. Grantholders could currently declare costs for these activities under FEC at the outset of the award. It can however be difficult to predict the suitable nature, timing and opportunity for engaging with the public and so we will continue to provide financial support through the various funding schemes currently available.

Key Conclusion: BBSRC should develop an annual return procedure for research outputs, including publications, where PIs are required to document outputs arising from grants for three years after completion. This ought to be a condition of further

BBSRC funding and be incorporated into the current review of final reporting procedures.

BBSRC is working with other Councils, via RCUK, on the development of a new system to capture the research outputs and outcomes from individual research grants on an on-going basis for at least three years after the end of the award. The Panel's views will inform BBSRC input to this development.

Key Conclusion: BBSRC needs to address the issues of research career structure and stability. This might be helped by encouraging PIs to apply specifically for the length and size of grant the work requires, by allowing research assistants to be named as co-investigators, and by attaching doctoral studentships to 5 year grants.

BBSRC recognises the importance of continuity and stability of funding for the research groups that we fund. This is being addressed by an existing programme that encourages grant proposals valued at between £2M and £5M for up to five years (see www.bbsrc.ac.uk/funding/grants/lola.html). We will encourage our grantholders to apply for the most appropriate level and mode of funding to complete the research, building up a portfolio of awards, including longer-term grants of five years' duration as well as traditional three-year awards. We recognise that a statement on our website stating that grants of all sizes are welcomed would be beneficial.