Dear Dr Mathias,

I am writing to respond on behalf of the Royal Society of Chemistry to the inquiry on the Role and priorities of the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) interim chair. In considering priorities for the new chair, we have drawn upon our previous responses to the Nurse Review of the Research Councils, the Stern Review of the Research of the Research Excellence Framework and the Higher Education Green Paper: Fulfilling our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice.

We would like to highlight the following points that relate to the areas of questioning that have been identified in the call for evidence.

The Higher Education and Research Bill, relies heavily on reusing the language and specifics from previous research legislation. This leads to two concerns; firstly that vital parts of our research and innovation system are not guaranteed the long-term stability needed to enable the whole system to function. Secondly, that in bringing together several different constituent parts, there is a lack of connectivity and overarching cohesion that may prevent the effective working of the overall structure. Without more formal protection, the role of UKRI’s chair will be vital in ensuring continuity of the system, and pulling the new mechanisms into an established order. There are a number of responsibilities outlined in the Royal Charters and that have become established, but will need to be firmly set in place in the new regime, and there will be a vital role in forming robust links with the new Office for Students.

The role and objectives of the interim Chair of UKRI, including any research or other input from UKRI on the content of the Bill.

Forming practices for consultation and evidence gathering.

With the removal of the Royal Charters, the HE and Research Bill requires only that the Secretary of State lay a statutory instrument before Parliament to change the priorities of any the research councils. We do not believe that this provides a sufficient and long-term safeguard in relation to changes that could have a significant and lasting impact on the UK’s research and innovation system, without any requirement for wider consultation. It is highly unlikely that such restructuring will happen during the interim Chair’s term, but it is vital that he takes the earliest opportunity to set in place practices and networks that will allow those that follow to rapidly gather evidence and then champion the community voice to government in relation to such matters, should they arise.
Working with CEOs of constituent bodies and specifically Innovate UK and Research England to define their roles within UKRI. The interim Chair will have the responsibility of convening the group of formerly separate bodies as UKRI. The Bill outlines some preliminary roles for the Research Councils, in particular repeating the priorities as set out in the Royal Charters. However the formal operating practices and strategic plans for each of them will need to be developed within the new UKRI. Furthermore the Bill provides little description of the purpose of each of Innovate UK and Research England. As a new body, Research England will need to be formally defined with respect to its position and purpose including the rationale for and shape of Quality Related (QR) funding.

Fundamental, curiosity-driven research is the foundation for a world-class research and innovation system, often laying the ground for future applications, and safeguarding this kind funding should be an early priority for UKRI. Whilst its impacts are not always obvious in advance, this type of research is vital for maintaining core capability in the UK and in enabling transformational research. It is not clear that the Bill provides sufficient and enduring clarity about the requirement that UKRI must support fundamental, applied and strategic research in a manner similar to the protection embedded for these in the Royal Charters of the Research Councils.

Postgraduate students are a vital component of a successful research system and support for their training and funding should be a core role for UKRI. The Royal Charters of the Research Councils required that they “promote and support related postgraduate training”, but no mention of this function is made in either the White Paper or the HE and Research Bill, with respect to the remits of UKRI or the Office for Students (OfS). Clarifying this role early on will be important. For chemistry and other STEM subjects, postgraduate students play a crucial role as primary researchers, as well as gaining transferrable skills through opportunities to contribute to undergraduate teaching and outreach. Their funding and training is essential to UK scientific outputs, as well as helping to build a highly skilled and productive UK workforce.

The governance of UKRI

UKRI’s governance structures should maintain the authority and appropriate autonomy of the Research Councils within their own respective domains. This is particularly important in relation to the development of future strategic plans and enabling research councils to attract leading researchers into relevant senior roles. Consolidating the research councils under UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) brings the opportunity to better coordinate across research boundaries, but it is essential that the removal of Royal Charters does not result in the perception that individual research councils are no longer able to serve and support their communities in delivering cutting edge research and innovation.

The governance structures of UKRI and the Office for Students (OfS) must ensure strong collaboration between these two bodies to preserve the integration of research and teaching. In many HE Institutions we see positive interactions between teaching and research responsibilities resulting in improved student experience and employability. The HE and Research Bill allows for information sharing between the OfS and UKRI but does not require their cooperation unless directed by the Secretary of State. The Bill also does not clarify if such direction should come from one or both Secretaries of State in the Departments for Education and for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy or the relevant Departments in the future. There is a risk that the separation of teaching and research in the new HE architecture will mean that the benefits of research informing teaching and learning practices could be lost. Ensuring a link between the two organisations’ governance could help to address this.

UKRI’s governance structures should ensure Research England and the OfS can work effectively with the Devolved Nations. The Higher Education White Paper highlighted the importance of the Devolved Nations working together, for example in running the Research...
Excellence Framework, but the current draft of the Bill presents no mention of the devolved nations at all. We anticipate that these amendments will be made in due course, but the Interim Chair will have a vital role in forming these links.

**UKRI’s role as we exit the European Union**

Providing a strong central voice for science in government, and building the capacity for international collaboration; both of these key roles would have been vital for the new UKRI regardless of political situation. However, as we enter negotiations with Europe it is essential that Interim Chair positions UKRI as a vocal advocate for science in these discussions. Furthermore, with the uncertainty around our access to the vital collaborative opportunities associated with Horizon 2020, UKRI’s role in building links and collaborative projects with research funders around the world will become ever more crucial.

I sincerely hope that these points will prove useful to the committee in the preparation for your introductory evidence session with Sir John Kingman. If you require anything further, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Yours sincerely,

Robert Parker
Chief Executive Officer, Royal Society of Chemistry