



PROSPECT SCIENCE BRIEFING: TRANSFERRING PUBLIC SECTOR SCIENCE LABS TO UNIVERSITIES

At least six public sector research institutes have transferred their staff to universities since 1997. Five more are scheduled to do so by April 2008. Is this good or bad for British science? One of the key questions is whether all the capability – and all the jobs – will be maintained. Past experience shows that transfer makes it easier for government to reduce or cease funding (see below).

If it is a choice between closing an institute or moving it to a university, moving is obviously the lesser of two evils.

But Prospect believes that true, themed research will never be achieved without long-term strategic funding, since the research will follow the pots of money.

One of the stated benefits of moving to a university is the increase in “critical mass”. But experience has shown that academics work on whatever projects they can get funded. There are lots of individual projects, with little to link them or benefit the scientists. There is no overall research strategy – apart from bring in as much money as you can.

Doing research in universities is expensive. The Hannah Research Institute closed in March 2006. Using figures from Glasgow and Strathclyde universities, it has cost between £4.6-5m to fund research involving 19 former members of the Hannah for three years (£240K per capita), whereas the entire Institute of around 75 staff could be funded by £7.4M over three years (£99K per capita).

Differences between institutes and universities: anecdotal evidence from Prospect members who have transferred

- * Attitudes to research in the university are more gung-ho, with less attention to detail and good lab practice.
- * Despite the best of intentions, university departments or divisions lack an overall feeling of collectivity or institute ethos. “It’s difficult to achieve an institute ethos given that managing academics is like cat-herding.”
- * Most of the labs and communal facilities are used by postgraduates/postdoctoral workers. Their inclination to look after equipment and keep it clean/well-maintained is not great.
- * Universities are very hierarchical, with relatively small academic elites. The public sector tends to be more collaborative.
- * Generally university teaching staff have no time to do any benchwork themselves, so the day-to-day incumbrances do not impinge on them and therefore there is little support for them for change to better laboratory practices.

- * University researchers will apply for grants to work on what they can attract funding for, not necessarily what they are interested in.
- * Funding for the majority of research workers on short-term contracts after they reach 40-45 is virtually non-existent, since they have to compete with younger workers, or university-funded colleagues who need only put a fraction of their time down on a grant.

Transfers scheduled between April 2007 and April 2008

Easter Bush Research Centre

Two Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council institutes: Roslin and the Institute for Animal Health's Neuropathogenesis Unit, and staff from the Scottish Agricultural College will move to the University of Edinburgh to become part of EBRC in April 2008.

Rowett Research Institute

The Rowett Research Institute plans to join forces with the University of Aberdeen to establish a centre of excellence in nutrition and human health. The Rowett will become an Institute within the University.

Institute of Grassland and Environmental Research

In February 2007, BBSRC council announced that it was "minded" to support the transfer of two of its three Institute of Grassland and Environmental Research sites in Wales to a new partnership with the University of Wales Aberystwyth and Bangor by April 2008 – subject to satisfactory development of the science, management and investment strategy. It's site at North Wyke in Devon will be run as part of Rothamsted Research.

PAST EXPERIENCE

Government which loves fruit poisoned horticulture research

Horticulture Research International was a world-leader in its field. It employed 500 staff – the single largest team of horticulture research and development scientists in the world. It was publicly owned and funded by the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

In July 2003, the government decided to break up HRI and sell its key facilities. Prospect accused the government of giving away millions of pounds of public assets and poisoning the roots of horticulture research in the UK. HRI had five sites. Since 2003, one site has been sold, one site has closed and almost 200 staff have been made redundant.

Under the terms of the sale, Defra:

- * sold HRI's labs and infrastructure at a bargain basement price: Warwick bought the freeholds to Wellsbourne and Kirton End for £2.51m and £0.0525m respectively.
- * sold the Rocks Farm site at East Malling for £150,000 to East Malling Trust and East Malling Research

- * guaranteed contracts worth £49.8m over 5-8 years. In 2004-05 an additional £2,250,000 was set aside to support the guarantees provided to the University of Warwick and East Malling Research
- * paid redundancy compensation to 128 staff in 2003/04
- * transferred the existing intellectual property rights (arising from Defra research contracts with HRI) to Warwick-HRI
- * gave up £2.05m in return for conditions attached to a conference centre at East Malling
- * paid £1.6m for backlog maintenance at the East Malling and Wye sites and the transitional costs of establishing East Malling Research (EMR).

Defra did secure agreement to an unspecified "share of proceeds" if all or parts of the sites were subsequently sold or commercially developed. But the agreements have end dates: 15 years for Wellesbourne; 20 years for Kirton and 30 years for East Malling.

At the time of the sale, Prospect asked why Defra was willing to pay this money to privatise HRI, but not put that money into supporting HRI as a public sector body.

Efford

The Efford research facility Lymington, Hampshire was valued at £4.5m when it was closed in October 2003. It was sold in lots between January 2005 and January 2006 for £2,460,000. But the public does not know who bought the lots because the government says: "Information about the purchaser of each asset is not held centrally and obtaining this information would incur disproportionate costs for the department."

What happened to Wye?

Wye College had a long and illustrious career. It was founded as a college for secular priests in 1447. The East Malling fruit research station was established in 1921 (closely linked with Wye/independent from 1939). The Hop Research Station was born in 1949. Wye College merged with the Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine in August 2000. In December 2005, Imperial College, Ashford Borough Council and Kent County Council signed a concordat to build a research centre, science hub and associated housing at Wye. After a huge campaign (details at www.save-wye.org), Imperial dropped the plans in September 2006. But after celebrating its centenary in 2006, the Hop Research Station (part of EMR) is due to close in 2007 with the loss of 12 posts.

The HRI experience raises many questions which Prospect believes government should answer before it transfers any more public sector science labs and sites to universities, including:

Who will place research contracts when the Defra guarantees run out?

What were the total redundancy costs?

How many of the staff who were made redundant are still working in horticulture research?

Has all of Efford now been sold or are there more lots to sell? Why won't the government say who bought them?

What will happen to the Vegetable Gene Bank at Wellesbourne when the contract runs out in 2008?

In 1990 Wye College signed an agreement with MAFF to jointly maintain and develop National Fruit Collection at Brogdale. What has happened to this?

Natural Resources Institute

NRI's roots date back to 1894. A major - though not exclusive - component of NRI's work is concerned with sustainable development in developing countries and those with economies in transition. In the past, NRI has worked on: identifying and promoting new uses of tropical products, anti-locust research and overseas pest research.

The quality and strength of UK research was instrumental in building the reputation of the UK in international development. A report from the House of Commons science and technology committee in 2004 said: "UK scientists and engineers working in international development have, by and large, an excellent reputation. Dr Grant Singleton from Australia's national science agency, CSIRO, told us that they "continually find that UK scientists in the agricultural and natural resource management sectors are held in very high regard by government officials, scientists, NGOs and small-holder farmers in developing countries in South Asia and South East Asia".

Hubert Zandstra, Director General of the International Potato Center, also stated that the "expertise of British international staff has been crucial in the implementation of projects that advance scientific capacity in developing countries".

NRI was one of the organisations which contributed to this excellent reputation. In the 1980s, it employed around 550 staff. In 1996, NRI became part of the University of Greenwich. In February 2005, there were just 45 professional staff. The university has discussed the possibility of closing NRI but decided to reduce the number of operational groups from six to three, with up to 20 more redundancies possible.

The commons select committee said: "If it is not averted, the current erosion of the UK development sciences research base will severely undermine the ability of the UK to play its full part in international development in years to come. The Government should not sit back and watch this happen, never mind contribute to the process of erosion."

As NRI pointed out, "in many other countries (US, France, Holland, Germany) governments and their development agencies have recognised mechanisms of funding to ensure specialist research dedicated to international development is available and retained as part of the national S&T asset portfolio. This is seen as both adding to the effectiveness of aid policy and conferring significant benefits on the competitiveness of national S&T industry".

Pay differences

Prospect members at the National Oceanographic Centre, Southampton are angry that their pay has fallen by about 20 per cent in 12 years compared to their university colleagues doing the same or similar work – often ultimately paid for from NERC money.

The National Oceanographic Centre, Southampton, is a collaborative centre between NERC and the University of Southampton. NERC staff there work in close proximity with University of Southampton staff. In many groups, staff with different employers work together and/or are engaged in similar work. University-employed staff often work on

NERC projects funded by NERC core strategic money. But many NERC staff at NOCS earn less than the university-employed staff that they supervise.

When NERC staff first moved to NOCS (or Southampton Oceanography Centre, as it was then known), their pay was about 10 per cent ahead of the equivalent university grades. Now university grades are about 10 per cent ahead of equivalent NERC grades. University staff also have more holiday days per year than NERC staff.

Pay gulf in Southampton

University-employed equivalent

NERC pay band

(The new university pay bands are broadly comparable to NERC pay bands in job descriptions)

£40,355 to £50,730 pa
(up to £58,413 p.a. with the Dean's approval)

£34,650 to £45,440
(Band 4)

£30,913 to £40,335 pa
(up to £45,397 with discretionary increments)

£29,360 to £34,630
(Band 5/SSO)

£24,402 to £30,133 pa
(up to £34,793 with discretionary increments)

£22,220 to £27,440
(Band 6/HSO)

£19,862 to £24,402 pa
(up to £27,465 with discretionary increments)

£18,400 to £21,580
(Band 7)

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March 2007**