UK DEANS OF SCIENCE

Response to the Consultation on the Code of Practice for Scientific Advisory Committees

The UK Deans of Science is a national body that seeks to represent the individuals (usually formally designated as Deans) who are responsible for science in HEIs across the UK and who generally hold the budgets for science including any research budgets.

In responding to this consultation we would first wish to observe that the best way for the scientific advisory committee system to work is for it to be demonstrably independent of government (and opposition parties) and for all activities to be carried out openly unless there is are over-riding security issues that prevent this. It must base all its considerations as far as possible on scientific, proven evidence. We believe that SACs should be allowed to operate with an equivalent level of independence as is given to the Treasury's Budget Responsibility Committee.

Responses to the consultation's specific questions are given below.

Question 1. Maintaining strong relationships

(a) *What role should be played by and what expectations should the SAC Chair have with regard to relationships between:*
- *i) The SAC and its sponsoring Department; and*
- *ii) The Minister or departmental Chief Scientific Adviser to whom the SAC reports?*
- *iii) The Chairs of other SACs whose interests may overlap?*

The role of chair of SAC Chair is always likely to be a high maintenance position. It is therefore essential that the sponsoring department gives the Chair all requested access to information and to an excellent secretariat of sufficient numbers to deliver the research demands and other needs of the Committee. The secretariat and other support staff must have sufficient breadth and depth of scientific knowledge and skills. It would be helpful if the career structure encouraged them to remain with the same SAC for a reasonable number of years before moving on. The Departmental Chief Scientific Adviser, departmental civil servants and the Minister with the rest of the ministerial team should make themselves readily available as necessary to the Chair (though it is recognised that the availability of a Minister's time may be limited). It is essential that all exchanges between the Chair and the various departmental people are conducted with as much openness and mutual trust as possible. There must be no interference or undermining of the independence of the Chair.

There must be no unexpected surprises for Chairs or Ministers as a result of announcements or comments made by either party. Where a Minister intends to make any statement relating to advice received from the SAC, the content of the statement should be communicated to the SAC chair in advance. It is recognised that there may be concern about information leaking, for example prior to a major Ministerial announcement but risks can be minimised in such circumstances by the SAC Chair receiving the information just before the announcement takes place. This would have the added advantage of making it less likely that the SAC Chair would be suspected of any leaks that may occur. Of course, SAC Chairs should be expected to operate to a similar etiquette.

We would expect all SAC Chairs to have, as part of their role, the requirement to liaise as appropriate with other Chairs. However, one can foresee circumstances, particularly where major, interdisciplinary

issues are being considered (eg sustainability, energy, food safety) where SACs might dispute which one should lead. This can be partially prevented by making very clear what each SACs remit should be but there may also be an argument for allowing SACs to work together on such challenging problems. Any disputes that cannot be resolved should be dealt with first by Departmental Chief Scientific Advisers (DCSAs) and ultimately by the Government CSA. Of course, such difficulties might be reduced if attention is given to the possibility of merging some SACs that have similar or overlapping remits.

(b) *What steps can be taken for SACs to maintain their independence and objectivity?*

No one should carry out acts that interfere with or undermine the independence of the Chair. The Chair's independence can be further assured by

- appointment procedures that are open and free from bias. All posts for Chair (and membership of a SAC) should be advertised and awarded through open competition.
- appointment panels being devoid of any current or recently retired politicians
- SACs being allowed to operate with an equivalent level of independence as is afforded to the Treasury's Budget Responsibility Committee. This would put scientific advice on a par with that relating to financial matters and make membership of SACs much more attractive to a wider range of individuals.

(c) *How might SACs best resolve disputes between members or with Ministers and/or sponsoring departments?*

Disputes between members must be resolved within the Committee, in the first instance by negotiation. If there are insurmountable differences of view, for example, in drawing up recommendations, then ultimately these should be made public in any report that is produced. Problems between a SAC and Ministers or departments should be dealt with in a similar fashion. In all cases the Departmental CSA could be used as an arbitrator.

Notwithstanding this response we are concerned that this question may be attempting to solve the issue of cases where the SAC makes a recommendation and the Minister or sponsoring department does not agree with the findings. It is essential that the two sides understand precisely what remit they have. The SAC is not an elected body; it exists to be a source of independent advice. The Government is elected to govern and make decisions. Where there are differences of opinion both sides must be allowed to express them in an appropriately professional manner, both in private and in public. The SAC Chair and its members must not be under threat of dismissal for disagreeing with a government decision.

Question 2. Openness and Transparency

.

a) *In some cases, for example national emergencies, publication of advice in the public domain may not be possible in advance of government decision making. How can this process be best communicated and managed?*

We see nothing wrong in advice not being made public under such circumstances. However, a set of principles need to drawn up that set out the broad terms under which this would happen and processes developed for later publication of the advice that was obtained (if this becomes a possibility) with an explanation as to why the advice could not be made public earlier. Regular reviews of the occasions when these principles are invoked should be carried out to ensure that the Government is using such powers only when absolutely necessary. What must not be allowed is the suppression of publication when it later transpires that the Government, in ignoring the advice, made incorrect decisions.

b) *How can SACs ensure that non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) are used appropriately? In what circumstances are NDAs appropriate?*

No comment.

c) *What training could be provided to SAC Chairs and members to assist in their interactions with the media?*

The skill of dealing with the media (or to show evidence of the ability to be trained to do so) should be an essential criterion for appointment to a SAC. Beyond this we cannot see any alternative to the type of training that is now widely available – but the focus should be on training for scientific communication rather than in political argument.

d) *What should the considerations in selecting a nominated spokesperson be, and should this be tailored to the programme of work, for example, is there a benefit in having a nominated spokesperson per project?*

While it may make the post very demanding, the Chair should normally be the spokesperson for the SAC. However, the SAC should discuss and agree for each project whether this should be the case taking into account the required level of specific scientific or other expertise that the spokesperson may need.

Question 3. Engaging the Scientific Community and Succession Planning

a) *(i) How can the balance of expertise on SACs between scientific experts, those from other professions and key partner organisations be determined*
(ii)How can the balance of expertise required for SAC secretariats be determined?

These two questions may in some circumstances be too simplistic. Some SACs have narrow agendas but we believe that some will increasingly need to take on issues that require a very broad multidisciplinary approach. This will mean a level of flexibility in terms of the makeup of the SACs and will require a multidisciplinary approach to the appointment of the secretariat. There will be cases where it is necessary to have expertise in the social sciences in addition to the traditional STEM disciplines but this must never be at the expense of STEM knowledge in the SAC or its secretariat.

b) *What steps can SACs take to ensure that expertise is maintained and future skills needs identified? What practical steps might be taken to broaden the pool of potential candidates?*

The SACs themselves need to carry our regular reviews, in partnership with their secretariat and departmental staff, to maintain an understanding of their future needs. The Departmental CSAs and the Government CSA will also be engaging in regular horizon scanning. Such activity will produce agendas that have time frames which are often far beyond one term of Government and will ensure that SACs can be proactive as well as reactive.

c) *How might the broader scientific and engineering community feed into the work of SACs, the consideration of future work priorities and any potential refocusing of priorities?*

We believe that there is a simple answer to this question. The SACs should operate in a similar way to that used by the Parliamentary Science and Technology Select Committee and other similar committees – announcing the topic that it is investigating and engaging with, and requesting contributions from, the wider scientific community. It is accepted that this would create a heavy workload for members and the secretariat, but it has the potential to bring in a huge amount of additional expertise.

Question 4

Is there any other information that could be usefully included in the Code of Practice?

We believe that the aspects of the scientific method – incorporating evidence collection/analysis and the importance of communicating risk and probability – could be further strengthened and emphasised within the Code.

Ian Haines
Executive Secretary, UK Deans of Science
December 2010