University and College Union submission to the science and technology committee inquiry into international policies and activities of the research councils

1. The University and College Union (UCU) represents nearly 120,000 further and higher education lecturers, managers, researchers and many academic-related staff such as librarians, administrators and computing professionals across the UK. We welcome the opportunity to respond to the select committee inquiry into the international policies and activities of the Research Councils.

International collaboration

2. International academic collaboration is an important activity because it helps to enhance the quality and vitality of UK research. In recent years there has been a greater emphasis on the international role of the seven UK research councils.[1] Most research councils offer overseas travel grants and workshops to enable researchers to exchange ideas and develop future partnerships. Some research councils now fund postgraduate students from overseas to work on projects. We welcome these initiatives, though awareness of them remains fairly low amongst the academic and research community. We also believe that the research councils could do more to encourage greater participation from new academics, from individuals in 'less research intensive' institutions and from staff based in geographically remote parts of the UK.[2]

3. Research council partnerships with international agencies and institutions remain heavily focussed on countries within the European Union. Within the EU research collaboration is not only actively encouraged by national government agencies but also via the EU-funded European Framework Programme. The newly-established European Research Council will promote further collaboration between EU higher education institutions.

4. Outside the EU, formal collaboration schemes involving the UK research councils are much less developed. A recent report for the Gatsby Charitable Foundation shows that this is true even in relation to 'research strong' countries such as the United States.[3] We welcome the fact that a number of research councils are now looking to strengthen their links with reciprocal US funding agencies such as the National Science Foundation. There is also a push by the UK Government to encourage partnerships with university communities that are rapidly expanding their research capacities. The UCU welcomes these broader non-EU partnerships as an opportunity to establish new links with academic staff in countries such as China and India. However, we believe that these new global partnerships must be driven by genuine intellectual exchanges rather than simply economic motivations.

5. The UCU would like to see more research council funding for collaborative projects with developing country institutions. We welcome the joint research council poverty reduction projects with the Department for International Development (DfID) but believe that more could be done in this area – both in terms of levels of funding and research council working methods. For example, the current rules on eligibility for grant holders sometimes leads to UK researchers working in developing countries when local researchers could be gaining the experience and, in some cases, might be doing a better job. We feel that when projects are funded to conduct research in developing countries it should be expected that local researchers are employed whenever possible.

EU Framework Programme

6. The UCU believes that EU-funded research brings considerable benefits to UK higher education. We, therefore, are concerned about possible cutbacks in the 7th Framework Programme (FP7) as a result of the establishment of the new European Institute of Technology (EIT). We believe that the whole concept of the EIT is wrong-headed and has been put forward for political reasons without having been thought through in detail. Now that detail is put in place it becomes clear that the EIT project will be a drain on higher education activity elsewhere, and may well be supported at a cost to other research activities, including Framework 7 funded-programmes. As well as creaming finance from proven areas of work, the EIT proposals pose other problems including governance, academic freedom and intellectual property rights. On the other hand, so far there is little concrete evidence of potential added value from the EIT proposals as they stand. The UCU calls on the European Commission to abandon their EIT proposals and to use the resources to fully fund the 7th Framework Programme.

International mobility

7. The genuine mobility of academic and academic-related staff is a key issue for UCU members. International mobility is not only a tool to promote cooperation across borders but also contributes to the personal and professional development of staff. In order to examine this issue in more detail we recently hosted an official 'Bologna' seminar on staff and student mobility within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). This seminar, hosted in conjunction with Education International and ESIB - the European students' movement, flagged up the need for concerted institutional, national and international action to remove the obstacles to staff mobility.[4]

8. In general, most 'inward' and 'outward' mobility in UK universities takes place amongst postdoctoral scientists and engineers working in 'research intensive' institutions.[5] To some extent this type of international 'early career' mobility occurs irrespective of the specific policies of individual research councils. As one of our members suggested in response to the current inquiry:

> *"Scientist mobility is increasing rapidly in Europe anyway, as young PhD students and post-docs (certainly those from Eastern/Central Europe) no longer see national boundaries as important, and they are willing to learn English to pursue their careers in the UK and USA."*

At the same time, the research councils can play a role in facilitating the mobility of researchers across borders, for example, via exchange programmes, study visits and foreign language training, particularly in less frequently spoken languages. We believe that the current mobility support policies of the research councils also need to be underpinned by a stronger equality dimension as opportunities for certain groups of staff (e.g. women) and for researchers from particular parts of the world (e.g. developing countries) remain unequal. As part of this process, the research councils could do more to utilise the potential of 'virtual' mobility, including use of the internet, e-libraries and video conferencing, as alternatives to physical relocation.

9. Making international mobility *meaningful* also requires action on the part of national governments, for example, in removing current visa and work permit restrictions. There also needs to be greater convergence of social security and pension arrangements across the EHEA. We realise that these issues are extremely complex and go way beyond the remit of the UK research councils and the current select committee inquiry. However, if ministers, funding agencies and higher education institutions want to *make researcher mobility a reality* across the EHEA and beyond, these issues will need to be addressed.

End notes

[1]Research Councils UK (2004) *International Partnerships in Action*,
http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/cmsweb/downloads/rcuk/documents/roadmap.pdf
[2]For example, the research councils might look to provide short-term development funds to improve opportunities for international collaboration amongst low-applicant and geographically remote departments, including subsidising expensive travel costs incurred during the preparatory application stage.
[3]Sir Gareth Roberts (2006) *International Partnerships of Research Excellence – UK-USA Academic Collaboration,* project supported by the Gatsby Charitable Foundation.
[4]The papers from the Bologna mobility seminar are available on the Education International website
http://www.ei-ie.org/highereducation/en/calendarshow.php?id=68&theme=highereducation
[5]Bahram Bekhradnia and Thomas Sastry (2005) *Migration of Academic Staff to and from the UK*, Higher Education Policy Institute.