

30 October 2014

The Smith Commission,  
7th Floor,  
144 Morrison Street,  
EH3 8EX

Email: [haveyoursay@smith-commission.scot](mailto:haveyoursay@smith-commission.scot)

Dear Lord Smith of Kelvin,

### **Re: The Smith Commission: call for views**

The Society of Biology is a single unified voice, representing a diverse membership of individuals, learned societies and other organisations. We are committed to ensuring that we provide Government and other policy makers - including funders of biological education and research – with a distinct point of access to authoritative, independent, and evidence-based opinion, representative of the widest range of bioscience disciplines.

The Society represents a body of over 15 000 individual members and over 90 Member Organisations all working within the life sciences. Approximately 10% of the Society's individual members are based in Scotland, working with an active Scottish Branch and Council.

Scotland has approximately 8.5% of the UK's population but Scotland's universities and research institutes attract around 14% of UK research funding annually.<sup>1</sup> Scottish Universities compete successfully for funding, winning £116 of research income per head of population in 2010 (in comparison to £68 per capita in England, £52 in Wales and £50 per capita in Northern Ireland)<sup>2</sup>.

The biosciences in particular are an important and fruitful sector in Scotland. The life sciences industry alone contributes more than £3.1 billion to the Scottish economy.<sup>3</sup> A number of UK-funded, large-scale research facilities are based in Scotland, including the MRC centre for regenerative medicine, the National Avian Research Facility and the offshore renewable energy catapult centre. Research Institutes, such as the Roslin Institute, the Rowett Research Institute and the James Hutton Institute, are important research contractors for UK bioscience and agriculture. Thus the resilience of the life science sector is vital, for both Scotland and the rest of the UK.

The Society of Biology therefore welcomes this opportunity to highlight issues of importance to the biosciences and the wider science landscape to the Smith Commission while you consider how to oversee the process to take forward the devolution commitments.

The Scottish Government recognised the advantages of retaining current research structures in its white paper for independence issued in November 2013. The proposal concluded that in the event of an Independent Scotland a 'common research area' should be maintained to ensure that no

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<sup>1</sup> £230m from UK research councils; £130m from UK-based charities; £100m from the UK Government and £47m from industry, commerce and public corporations.

<sup>2</sup> Universities Scotland, Knowledge Exchange: facts and figures; <http://www.universities-scotland.ac.uk/index.php?page=briefing>

<sup>3</sup> Society of Biology, *Possible Implications for Science and Engineering in Scotland in the Independence Debate: A Response to the Scottish Science Advisory Council*, May 2013

barriers to collaborative research and access to facilities existed for researchers throughout the UK. The paper also recognised that it was in the interests of both Scotland and the rest of the UK to maintain a common research area including shared research councils, access to facilities and peer review.<sup>4</sup>

The Society of Biology recognised this stance and urged that the current structure be maintained and overall funding for science increased to maintain competitiveness and research leadership for the continued success of the life science sector in Scotland.<sup>5</sup>

The Society advocates that the Commission remain mindful of the nature of scientific enterprise when considering decisions regarding funding. Scientific research takes time, and research projects often require sustained funding over a number of years to ensure necessary technical and conceptual development, acquisition of data, maturity and impact. To maintain performance it will be essential that funding for research and infrastructure is protected. Furthermore, scientific research is a collaborative process and numerous fruitful associations exist across the UK. It is vital that these remain unaffected by plans for further devolution of powers to Scotland and that research funding continues to be based on scientific quality determined by a thorough system of peer review.

The Society is concerned that changes made to the current system for funding and regulating research could put Scotland at a competitive disadvantage in the life sciences and also place research across the UK at risk; proposals for change must therefore be approached with great caution. A UK-wide focus will facilitate and benefit collaborations between universities, institutes and companies throughout the UK with a focus on UK-wide issues and problems.

In addition to research funding, other factors affect the success of the life sciences sector in the UK, such as ethical approval processes for clinical research and legislation governing animal research. Any changes to UK-wide regulations could prevent scientific collaborations and result in a multiplicity of diverse regulations and unnecessary complexity and delays. The Society urges the Commission to consider carefully the potential implications of including these reserved issues.

Current Research Council arrangements, although a reserved matter, work well for the UK as a whole including the provision of support for a vibrant life science research environment in Scotland. In light of this success, we ask you to ensure that any decisions made regarding changes to the current system for research funding in the UK are made with due consideration of the issues presented and with full knowledge and appreciation of the current benefits gained by being part of a UK-wide research area.

The Society of Biology also supports the Association of Medical Research Charities submission to the Smith Commission.

Yours sincerely,

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<sup>4</sup> The Scottish Government (2013), *Scotland's Future, Your guide to an independent Scotland* <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/0043/00439021.pdf>, p.201

<sup>5</sup> Society of Biology submission, *Scotland's Educational and Cultural Future*, March 2014 [https://d1g8qexchac5be.cloudfront.net/images/Society\\_of\\_Biology\\_Education\\_and\\_Culture\\_Committee\\_response.pdf](https://d1g8qexchac5be.cloudfront.net/images/Society_of_Biology_Education_and_Culture_Committee_response.pdf)



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