

Response to the Science and Technology Select Committee (Commons) inquiry into a new UK research funding agency

Written evidence submitted by the Nuffield Council on Bioethics

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Background

- 1 The Nuffield Council on Bioethics is an independent UK body that examines and reports on ethical issues arising in relation to developments in biological and medical research that concern the public interest. We welcome the opportunity to comment on the House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee inquiry into a new UK research funding agency.
- 2 In 2012, the Nuffield Council on Bioethics published [*Emerging biotechnologies: technology, choice and the public good*](#). This report explores the ethical issues and challenges raised by the concept of emerging biotechnologies and sets out a ‘public ethics’ approach to help guide improved practice in policy making, research, and regulation. The project was guided by an interdisciplinary [Working Party](#) that included UK academics and professionals from a number of institutions and backgrounds.

Key recommendations of the report

- 3 The *Emerging biotechnologies* report naturally focusses on issues related to biotechnology, but it also provides extensive analysis of UK research and innovation policy more generally.
- 4 The recommendations of the report of particular relevance to the Committee’s inquiry are:
 - 1) decision-makers should not uncritically pursue research funding policies that stress a linear relationship between publicly funded research and national economic prosperity or geopolitical advantage; and
 - 2) research priorities should be actively and transparently informed by social values and objectives.

The need for social and ethical research objectives

- 5 The research funding agency proposed in the 2019 Queen’s speech will be a significant addition to the UK’s research policy framework: its creation and future behaviour would be informed by, and in turn affect, the research policy landscape. The proposal offers an opportunity for improving national research policy, in that it allows for reconsideration of some underlying assumptions and permits greater coordination in funding.
- 6 In the *Emerging biotechnologies* report, we found that potential economic returns on investment in research and innovation has been a common theme in the Government’s science and technology policy for many years and Government publications have been framed largely in terms of “competitiveness” and “economic growth”, almost to the exclusion of other considerations. We concluded that research policy should attend explicitly to diverse perspectives and bodies of evidence rather than privileging a single, quantitative frame of evaluation (such as economic costs and benefits, or costs and benefits reduced to economic values).
- 7 The view that economic perspectives are privileged in Government research funding policy is reinforced by the phrasing used in the explanatory material for the 2019 Queen’s

speech, in which the Government's proposal for a new agency was made. That material emphasises the importance of R&D spending for the productivity of the UK economy, including claims that the UK's "world-leading excellence in science" is the foundation upon which "the UK's future prosperity and productivity" can be built and that increased national research funding will "encourage the world's most innovative businesses to invest in the UK".¹

- 8 Determining the purpose of nationally funded research is vital if a coherent approach is to be adopted, but doing so is difficult. During the development of the *Emerging biotechnologies* report we found that it was not possible to identify what research had been funded for a given societal challenge. It is not clear that an economic-focussed policy is the most effective in addressing problems of human health and welfare:
 - 1) there are common challenges to which international collaborative research is the best response and capturing technological value nationally should not impede that response; and
 - 2) it can be misleading to identify R&D performed in a particular nation with the prosperity of that nation. Only a fraction of R&D contributes to national growth, and the location of activities within a particular national boundary does not mean that they are part of a system working for the purposes of that nation.
- 9 This is not to say that national research funding cannot be of national value, especially for a knowledge economy like that of the UK. For example, research funding for military and national security objectives can have specifically national benefits; the Government noted in the Queen's speech explanatory material that the new research funding agency would, alongside its economic and industrial goals, "tackle some of the greatest challenges facing society". Yet, the language used by the Government to justify the proposed new research funding agency remains significantly, albeit not entirely, rooted in a seemingly linear connection between national research funding and national economic growth.
- 10 The crux of the problem is that it is simply not clear in whose interests UK science research is performed and funding allocated. General economic growth as a goal of research funding is a policy choice, regardless of its evidential basis, but economic growth does not capture all of the values that should be articulated when allocating public funding. In this sense, national research funding policy has become detached from the realities of research and social values. The proposed new agency offers an opportunity to address this problem.
- 11 One way of doing this is to reframe public research policy so that it is not informed by received assumptions but through continuous engagement with a broad range of societal interests and with the involvement of social actors who can bring understanding of these interests to help construct a public frame for research policy decisions. This engagement should be embedded in the fundamental structures and functions of the proposed agency at all levels – decisions, priorities, and goals for public research should be transparently decided and communicated.
- 12 The Select Committee may wish to consider whether the Government might, in establishing a new funding agency, take the opportunity to:
 - increase research coordination by ensuring that the structure and management of the new agency permits external observers, and the Government itself, to determine what research has been funded in response to specific societal challenges;

¹ HM Government (2019) [The Queen's Speech](#) 2019, p.106.

- examine how research agencies determine their research priorities, whether they are informed by past experience, and whether they aim to achieve or reflect consensus; and,
- adopt an approach to research objectives that explicitly involves social benefit rather than market value alone.