

Written evidence submitted to the House of Commons Public Bill Committee on the Higher Education and Research Bill by the Political Studies Association of the UK

Background

1. The Political Studies Association (PSA) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Public Bill Committee's consultation on the Higher Education and Research Bill.
2. The PSA was founded in 1950 to 'promote the study of politics'. The Association is formed of some 1,800 academics, students, researchers, policy makers, journalists and secondary school teachers. We are the primary Association for the study of political science in the UK and provide resources and events connecting academic research to wider audiences throughout the year. The Association has pursued this focus on the promotion of the study of politics in a non-partisan way and to audiences across and beyond the United Kingdom.

Part 1 of the Bill

Office for Students: Student and Staff Representation

3. In relation to Part 1 of the Bill, the PSA believes the effective and collaborative engagement of students and academic staff in formulating the policy on strategy and funding for higher education is positive and that the Office for Students (OfS) may enable better outcomes for the sector.
4. The PSA notes that Schedule 1, Clause 2, Subsection 2 of the Bill states that: 'The Secretary of State must, in appointing the chair and the ordinary members [of OfS], have regard to the desirability of the OfS's members (between them) having experience of— (a) representing or promoting the interests of individual students, or students generally, on higher education courses provided by higher education providers, (b) providing higher education on behalf of an English higher education provider or being responsible for the provision of higher education by such a provider ...' We think that if the OfS is to be truly focused on the interests of students and the discipline more generally, that this language should be revised to ensure that student and also academic staff representation is guaranteed on the board of the OfS rather than being merely desirable.
5. As Clause 23 of the Bill outlines the Office of Students will be responsible for assessing 'the standards and quality of higher education' in England. The PSA further notes that in Clause 24, Subsection 4 of the Bill that members of the OfS's Quality Assessment Committee 'must be individuals who appear to the OfS to have experience of providing higher education on behalf of an English higher education provider or being responsible for the provision of higher education by such a provider.' Clause 24, Subsection 6 states that 'The majority of the members of the Committee must be individuals who are not members of the OfS.' We welcome these parts of the bill as mechanisms to ensure that academic practitioners are involved in assessing standards in academic contexts. Their voices are fundamental in these discussions and judgements and we hope that they will not be side-lined through the creation of the OfS.
6. **In sum, in relation to Part 1 of the Bill, the PSA thinks that the language of Schedule 1 should be amended regarding the governance structure of the OfS and guarantee student and academic staff representation on the Board of the OfS.**

OfS: Academic Freedom

7. The PSA supports the statutory 'duty' of the OfS 'to protect academic freedom' outlined in Clause 35 of the Bill. We welcome the reference to this duty in other parts of the Bill such as Clause 2, Subsection 3. We particularly welcome it in relation to The Secretary of State's funding of OfS (Clause 66, Subsection 3) and the ability of The Secretary of State to give direction to OfS (Clause 69, Subsection 2).
8. Academic freedom has always been central to the development of new thinking in academic research across all fields and has been fundamental to human progress. This must not go unrecognised.

Part 3 of the Bill

UKRI Governance and Representation

9. The PSA believes that the establishment of UKRI will be a significant departure from the current funding system of higher education in England.
10. The PSA observes that the White Paper, 'Success as a Knowledge Economy', made reference to the Government's commitment to the Haldane Principle (p17, para 45). This sets out 'that decisions on individual research proposals are best taken by researchers themselves through peer review.' However, the Bill itself does not mention this key concept. Definitions of the Haldane Principle do vary and it may not be advisable for this principle to be added directly into the legislation. However, the PSA is concerned that the Bill does not adequately reflect the need for academic practitioners to be represented within UKRI or consulted by UKRI.
11. This issue leads us to comment on the directional relationship indicated by the Bill. The Bill very much centres power on the Secretary of State and the UKRI Board through Clause 87, Subsection 5 and Clause 90, Subsection 1, respectively and UKRI in particular with regard to the membership of the Research Council boards through Schedule 9, Clause 3.
12. The current stated intention is to retain the branding of the Economic and Social Research Council amongst other bodies. The PSA is concerned that without statutory rights for research communities to be consulted by the Secretary of State or UKRI or for the statutory representation of social scientists on the board of UKRI, the creation of this new organisation may lead to the diminution of social science, particularly political science, within the research and funding landscape.
13. For Research Councils to continue to function effectively in delivering high quality, relevant and economically and socially valuable research, academics should continue to be involved in their governance -- identifying strategies and research priorities for funding, as well as performing important peer review and evaluation roles. The effective governance of research relies on the goodwill of academics in assessing the quality of proposals and research outputs, and reforms to the existing system should keep in mind the importance of retaining support and legitimacy among the academic community. While there may be merits to centralisation and streamlining of research governance, these should not come at the expense of retaining the distinctiveness of individual research fields and disciplines.

14. We note that Schedule 9, Clause 2 does not require the Board of UKRI to contain members from the Research Councils. **The Nurse Review recommended that Research Council chairs should be ex officio members of the UKRI board and the PSA feels that this should be added to the legislation along with a duty to consult academics in particular research areas, such as those represented by the Research Councils.** Ultimately a more equitable delineation of rights and responsibilities is needed in this area particularly with regard to the internal dynamics of UKRI, which Parliament could instigate through changes to the Bill.
15. The PSA also questions the nature of the focus of UKRI and the Research Councils outlined in Clause 87, Subsection 4 of the Bill. This prioritises the Research Councils to consider arrangements '(a) contributing to economic growth in the United Kingdom, and (b) improving quality of life (whether in the United Kingdom or elsewhere). Both are key to a wider notion of the public good, which is a more expansive concept, which would allow for work and research across a broader remit. **We therefore recommend that the term "research for public good" be used instead of or in addition to the term 'quality of life'.**

The Definition of Science

16. As a final comment in relation to Part 3 of the Bill, the PSA notes that whilst Paragraph 102 states that "'science" includes social science' we see no reason why the language of the Bill should not refer to social science throughout, such as Part 3, Clause 85 and 99 as well as Schedule 9, Clause 2.
17. We believe that political studies, and the social sciences more generally, are important contributors to the advancement of scientific progress in the UK and offer a substantial and internationally-recognised research and evidence base for government decision-making. It is hard to imagine, for example, that strategies on adaptation to climate change could be advanced without research on public attitudes and policy parameters at a national and supranational level. Likewise the development of new technologies and scientific advances raise questions around governance and regulation, where social science research should not be treated as an 'add-on' or an afterthought to funding streams in the natural sciences. Policy making around global challenges and issues such as migration are inherently linked to the study of politics and society.
18. **The PSA recommends that 'social science' be added into the Bill at the following points: Part 3, Clause 85 and 99 as well as Schedule 9, Clause 2.**

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