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TECHNICAL REPORT

Options for Future MRC Unit Reviews

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Prepared for the UK Medical Research Council

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Summary

- 1 The Medical Research Council (MRC) is the UK's largest public funder of biomedical research. In 2002/03 its total expenditure was £430m; £200m of this was intramural support for research centres, including MRC Units. Currently, there are 35 MRC Units covering the range of biomedical disciplines – from the Protein Phosphorylation Unit in Dundee, to the Clinical Trials Unit in London.
- 2 MRC Units are wholly funded by the MRC in competition with programmes in universities. Most Units are attached to universities and are reviewed every five years by a panel of national and international experts who consider past achievements, current work and proposals for the next five years. The review process allows the MRC to respond to research priorities by creating, disbanding or restructuring its establishments and/or research groups accordingly.
- 3 In 2003, the new Chief Executive of the MRC, Professor Colin Blakemore, instigated a review of all forms of MRC funding including intramural support. The Steering Group on Units and University Partnerships (SGU&UP) was established to oversee and draw together a number of current policy and strategic issues in relation to intramural support and university partnerships more generally. This included a “consultation on and development of new approaches to Units Reviews”.

Developing new approaches and options to Unit Reviews

- 4 The SGU&UP asked RAND Europe to support its work. The study was broken down into three phases. The first phase resulted in a prioritised summary of key issues that needed to be considered in improving the assessment of Units. This was based on key informant interviews, a stakeholder survey and comparisons with other UK and international research funders.
- 5 Our initial work, published in July 2004, showed that there was widespread confidence that the use of peer review conducted every five or so years could give the scientific community, wider stakeholders and the public confidence that public money was being used to support exceptional science. However, there were also some concerns about the review process. First, although there was support for Units, there was ambiguity about their purpose. Since then, the MRC has produced its draft criteria for intramural support and these have been used in developing the options reported here. Second, there were genuinely held differences of opinion on the best way to review Units; an observation confirmed in our subsequent work. Finally, it was felt that if the purpose of Units is in part to help the MRC meet its strategic priorities,

there needed to be a more effective way of ensuring that these priorities were actively used in the review process and when considering future funding.

- 6 The second phase drew on methods developed for scenario analysis, and resulted in five approaches for Unit Reviews. These approaches were published in an interim Working Paper in November 2004. In order to avoid instinctive judgements on the strengths and weaknesses of each approach we labelled them after five professions or trades – the Tailor, Communicator, Entrepreneur, Surveyor and Horse Whisperer. The purpose of the approaches was to stimulate a debate on the best way to review Units. They were neither predictions nor proposals, but used brigaded and distilled ideas given to us in interviews and other interactions with key stakeholders.
- 7 The debate was managed through the third phase of the study, which involved a series of stakeholder workshops and interviews with senior university managers. For the study we clustered stakeholders into three groups: MRC Head Office Staff, Unit Directors, and Scientific Evaluators, including members of MRC Boards. The purpose of the workshops and interviews was to test the strengths and weaknesses of the approaches and to develop hybrid options that could be appraised and considered by the SGU&UP and MRC Council.
- 8 The output of this process were the two new options that are described below, and appraised in Table S.1. It should be noted that the options are not intended to be ‘either/or’ alternatives but serve to identify issues for discussion and action while suggesting two different ways in which each issue could be taken forward. Clearly, the SGU&UP and MRC may wish to opt for one or other option, select aspects from each option, or for a continuation of the status quo.

Option A: Scientific track record reviewed via site visits

- 9 The Review will be dominated by the Unit’s track record in producing high calibre science and meeting the scientific strategic need for long-term support, set out in the (draft) criteria for intramural support. Review Committees will be instructed to make an overall score of the Unit. Inputs into the review will be a Research Report, which is largely produced from a continuously updated website detailing the Unit’s activity, Referees’ comments on specific science and science-related activities of the Unit, an in-depth two-day site visit, and the Review Committee’s expert judgement. The Review Committee will produce a Summary Report at the Site Visit setting out its recommendations. The Review Committee will recommend whether the Unit should be supported or not, based on the calibre of past science and science-related activities, whether they provided value for money, and the likelihood of continued success. If support for the Unit is forthcoming, the Director and MRC Head Office staff will develop a financial plan based on the principle of zero-based budgeting. This budget will be awarded from a ring-fenced ‘intramural’ pot of funding that will establish competition for funds between Units (and Centres and Institutes) and be administered by a dedicated Intramural Support Team within MRC Head Office. In addition to making funding recommendations, the Review Committee will establish timescales for the next Review. In cases where a Unit is established and has a long track record of producing high quality science the review period could be extended to eight years.

Option B: Future scientific strategy assessed using a combination of methods

10 Every five years a Subcommittee of an MRC Board will review a Unit. Inputs into the Review will include (new) Strategic Audits, a Unit Scorecard Report using metrics derived from the OST Performance Framework, and a Unit Director's Proposal of his or her future programme. The Strategic Audits will provide relative indications of the value for money achieved from intramural versus extramural support in a given area, and establish a strategic direction for MRC funding. The metric-based assessment will give an indication of track record of the Unit and be aligned with OST indicators. The Director's Proposal will set out the vision and how it relates to the MRC strategy. Referees will review the Director's Proposal. On the basis of these inputs the Subcommittee can make a decision on whether to visit the Unit. Subcommittee assessment will be based on the quality of science and the strategic fit of the Unit. A QQR decision framework will be used to decide on the outcome of the QQR. Inevitably, some Units producing science of the highest calibre will no longer be supported, as they do not fit the strategic requirements of the MRC.

Option appraisal

11 In Table S.1 we summarise the strengths and weaknesses of the two options, using an appraisal framework looking at their suitability, feasibility and acceptability. For each criteria we have made an overall judgement on a scale of one to four, where one indicates that the criteria is not met, and four indicates that it is met in full.

Concluding comment

12 In presenting and appraising these two options, it is worth noting that they have been developed through a series of consultations with the key stakeholders involved in the Unit Review process. Over the two studies, we have conducted 36 key informant interviews, facilitated 4 workshops with 35 participants, and have had 50 survey responses.

13 The work presented here has taken the issues identified in our earlier findings and developed these into two appraised options with different, but not mutually exclusive, responses. In the final chapter of this report, we have identified 25 key questions that need to be answered before an improved Unit Review process can be finalised. We have suggested how the two options respond to these questions, but stress that these choices are best made by the MRC with wider interests to consider and balance. We hope that this report will support these deliberations and judgements.

Table S.1: Summary of options appraisal

Option A	Option B
Suitability – Does the Option assess whether a Unit meets the criteria for intramural support?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evolution of current system subject to similar weaknesses, including lack of emphasis on scientific strategic need. • May enable Units to take long-term view. • Accountability achieved through intramural pot of funding, alongside financial planning and zero-based budgeting. • Enhanced transparency of process. <p style="text-align: right;">✓ ✓</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allows MRC Units to be assessed against rationale/criteria for intramural support. • Provides mechanisms for benchmarking Units against one another. • Short review cycle. • Enhanced transparency of process. <p style="text-align: right;">✓ ✓ ✓ ✓</p>
Feasibility – Can the Option be implemented?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skills and competencies for process already exist. • Need to develop skills for Unit-based websites, financial planning and zero-based budgeting. <p style="text-align: right;">✓ ✓ ✓</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need to introduce <i>Strategic Audits</i> and <i>Unit Scorecards</i>. <p style="text-align: right;">✓ ✓</p>
Acceptability – Will the three key stakeholder groups support the Option?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Natural progression of existing process, therefore unlikely to raise strong concerns. • Concern that the process would not provide strategic accountability as expected for a public sector body. <p style="text-align: right;">✓ ✓ ✓</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support for ability to demonstrate accountability of MRC activities. • Concern about too great emphasis on top-down management of science and scepticism about metrics. <p style="text-align: right;">✓ ✓</p>