

Science and Engineering Assurance Review of the Department for Business Innovation & Skills (BIS)

Stakeholder organisation: British Sociological Association

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Please tell us about the nature of your engagement with the Department for Business Innovation & Skills (BIS) on science (including social science), engineering and linked analysis issues and activities (for example: provider of a service to BIS; delivery partner; consultee):

The British Sociological Association is very pleased to participate in this review. As one member said, “I think it is incredibly important that the BSA and the Academy of Social Science reply to this. We should state how important it is that there is social science engagement with science and especially because of their approach to STEM subjects at the expense of social sciences. In my work for the ESRC through TLRP [Teaching and Learning Programme] I am aware of how STEM takes precedence over other subjects in terms of both teaching and research”.

The BSA has undertaken a consultation of members in order to contribute positively to this review but the short time schedule has limited the information received. Below are a few emblematic examples of sociological engagement with BIS.

- a) Work conducted on graduate labour market change, and the relationship between higher education expansion and occupational change, including work on employer demand for graduates, impact of student work experience on employment practices and graduate careers, and of the supply of and demand for skills. Much of this is interdisciplinary, involving sociologists, social geographers and economists and includes engagement with policy debates on ‘the knowledge economy’, the demand for STEM skills and graduate skills generally, some funded by other government departments.
- b) Work with the EMAR division of BIS (the same division which is responsible for the Workplace Employment Relations Survey) on the design, delivery and analysis of the 2008 Fair Treatment at Work Survey.

- c) A BSA member is UK Management Committee representative on COST Action 298 (appointed directly by BIS). Within the scale of this review this is a very small role within a vast organization but the social sciences network through www.cost298.org is extensive. Future funding comes from the EU body in which BIS has a role, but thus far engineering projects have been favoured over social sciences. (COST is a network of European scientists and social scientists from telecommunication departments, universities and operators exploring the social dimensions of people's relationship to information and communication technologies.)
- d) A member of the BSA was one of a five-person panel of science and engineering reviewers of the Department of Transport (the Report is about to be finalised), which involved interviewing DfT staff. The BSA member was the only social scientist but the scientists/engineers on the panel had no hostility to social sciences.
- e) The UKCES 'Expert Panel' which advises them on policy and research contains at least four sociologists. See <http://www.ukces.org.uk/our-work/research-and-policy/partnership-working/expert-panel/>. (UKCES is the United Kingdom Commission for Employment and Skills.)

We are interested to hear your views regarding these working arrangements with the Department:

- a) Based on personal experience of working with BIS, a member of the BSA reported, “working arrangements were excellent, though, of course, the high turnover of staff in civil service posts can threaten continuity and dilute the accumulated intellectual capital of a partnership. I was also impressed by BIS efforts to push findings through to policy and keep me involved at this stage. The problem here was that the research we were involved in spanned at least two other departments’ competencies. There is some danger of having to duplicate effort to bring proper attention to the findings of research and a suspicion that other departments might not be galvanised by research which they do not feel they own. I must admit that, contrary to my initial expectations, I had little sense that the design, conduct, analysis or dissemination of research suffered because BIS was constrained by political priorities”.
- b) One change to BIS arrangements would be for them to leverage more opportunities for dialogue with social science stakeholders on the outcomes of the research they sponsor.

- c) It is very important to have a social scientists directly involved in the Science and Engineering Assurance Team.

- d) We are very concerned at the BIS emphasis on STEM subjects with no real consideration of the way in which these subjects depend on an understanding of social science issues for their impact. Lip-service is paid to the idea that technology transfer and translation are not linear processes but policymakers have been slow to recognize the implications for social science investment. Sociology has a role in helping to manage public responses to science and engineering. Every aspect of science and engineering is potentially improvable by social science input. For example, discovery is a social process. Sociology is well suited to consider the social conditions necessary for innovation. Technology transfer/translation is also a social process. New technologies are potentially disruptive of existing social relations of production and can be resisted; this resistance needs to be better understood sociologically. BIS needs interdisciplinary social scientists – not just economists – sitting within their science and technology policy processes at every stage, because science and engineering work in a social context. The UK has outstanding strengths in Science and Technology Studies within the social sciences – identified by the 2008 Sociology RAE panel – but the condition of the field is precarious. Most of the social science funding is flowing through BBSRC and EPSRC and looks invisible – certainly it is not cumulating because it tends to take the form of isolated RAs working with science groups, receiving limited support from institutionalized STS centres. There is no formal national network or conference in this field, except for those linked to biosciences drawn to the ESRC Genomic investment. BIS need to give a strategic lead if this community is not to disappear because it is turning out high-quality PhD and postdoc researchers into a shrinking market.

Please give us your views on the Department's use of science, engineering and linked analysis with respect to the criteria attached:

- a) We would give BIS high marks on all of the criteria especially their dedication to the highest standards for research and their leadership in prioritising areas for research that the academy has neglected, and which it might find hard to fund. We would also commend the exemplary speed BIS showed getting both results and data into the public domain and their continued commitment to further dissemination.

- b) BIS needs to be reminded that sociologists make a significant contribution to policy and practitioner research and evaluation of government and Research Council policies and practices. The government need a strong social science component if contemporary issues are to be properly analysed. The increasingly interdisciplinary problem-focused approach to research funding taken by the Research Councils and the European Union, combined with the growth of international bilateral, trilateral programmes on such topics as poverty, AIDS/HIV, asylum, environmental and climate change, local sustainability and economic restructuring, all require mixed-methods and interdisciplinary research with a strong social science presence.