



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Science and Technology Committee

Oral evidence: Pre-appointment hearing: Research England Executive Chair, HC 636

Wednesday 20 July 2022

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Aaron Bell (Chair); Chris Clarkson; Tracey Crouch; Rebecca Long Bailey; Graham Stringer.

Questions 1 - 33

Witness

[I](#): Professor Dame Jessica Corner, Government's preferred candidate for the role of Executive Chair of Research England.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]



Examination of witness

Witness: Professor Dame Jessica Corner.

Q1 **Chair:** I am Aaron Bell, serving as one of the two interim co-Chairs of this Committee because our former Chair, Greg Clark, has returned to Cabinet as Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

Before I turn to today's main business, I would like to pay tribute to Greg for his chairmanship over the past two and a half years. I think it is fair to say they have probably been the most extraordinary two and a half years in the history of this Committee. I know how proud Greg is of all of our work on covid, specifically our evidence sessions and reports in which we outlined the use of scientific advice in responding to the pandemic, and the joint report we did with the Health and Social Care Committee on lessons learned.

Under Greg's chairmanship we conducted many other vital inquiries, including our current work on diversity in STEM and our report on what has now become ARIA, whose first chief executive officer, Ilan Gur, and first chair, Matt Clifford MBE, were both appointed this week.

On a personal note, Greg began his tenure with six brand-new MPs from the 2019 intake, including me. His mentorship and guidance in extremely difficult times have been really appreciated by all of us.

We are meeting today for a pre-appointment hearing with Professor Dame Jessica Corner, the Government's preferred candidate for the role of executive chair of Research England. Before I turn to Dame Jessica, may I ask whether any Members wish to declare any relevant interests? If not, Dame Jessica, thank you very much for being here. Will you outline what your motivation was in applying for this role?

Professor Dame Jessica Corner: I have had a very long career in higher education, in research. I started out training to be a nurse through an academic route. I have had a long career in applied health research, particularly in cancer and supportive care areas. I have worked in multiple different kinds of institutions across the higher education sector, most recently, as you know from my CV, as Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research and Knowledge Exchange at the University of Nottingham, where I have gone from being a specialist right through to being strategic lead for all disciplines and all subjects in a large research-intensive university.

It is a wonderful opportunity to bring all that experience over a long career to the role in Research England and look at the direction in which the research system, which Research England has the job of stewarding and supporting, will go over the next year. It is a fantastic opportunity to bring those insights and experience to the role.

Q2 **Chair:** You obviously bring to this a lot of relevant experience. You explained to us in the questionnaire we sent you before the session that



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you had not worked with a Government Department before or worked regularly with Ministers, although you are familiar with the science and innovation directorate within BEIS. What knowledge and skills do you think you will need to develop to get the most out of working with Whitehall Ministers and Government Departments?

Professor Dame Jessica Corner: It is not that I have never worked in this context, but it has been on an intermittent basis in the various roles I have had, mostly connecting over specific issues rather than on a more day-to-day basis. I am already beginning to talk about what sort of induction would be useful to get to know all the various individuals with the different roles they have and get closer to the ways of working and day-to-day practices. I think it is more an induction programme.

I am looking forward to being able to take the managing public money preparation, which I believe is a course that one would be encouraged to take. There are various things like that, but it is more about being inducted into the role for this purpose rather than specific skills.

Q3 **Chair:** Obviously, the role is about disbursing public money, which you just alluded to. Do you also see the role as lobbying for further investment in research and development and the science base?

Professor Dame Jessica Corner: The role certainly is to make the case for the elements for which Research England in particular is responsible, so the dual support system and the funding for that is very much a role.

I am not sure whether "lobbying" is quite the right word; it is more about helping understanding of what it does, because it can be a bit opaque for people who are not familiar with it. It is a vital component that balances the more episodic, competitively won or mission driven-type elements of research funding for science and innovation. Without that, the system just does not work and you get into the very short term and you cannot protect careers and develop things within universities, for example.

I think it is about bringing it to full visibility, showing the things that it does and using that to make the case for the long-term sustainable future for that sort of funding.

Q4 **Chair:** Of course, you will be forming relationships with Ministers and senior officials. There may be new Ministers by the time you take up the job, given what is going on at the moment. What challenges do you think you might face with those relationships, and how would you address any such challenges?

Professor Dame Jessica Corner: It is always good to be able to develop a personal rapport, and getting time to do that is important, so trying to find things on which it would be good to work together and introduce them to incoming Ministers would be a great way of doing that.

At times, new directions or policy positions might need to be considered. I guess that, if they are very different or it means a big transition, it



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would be about trying to help a Minister understand the repercussions of that and work positively on it.

Q5 **Chair:** You told us that you responded to the advert for the job. Did anyone in government or any public agency encourage you to apply for the job?

Professor Dame Jessica Corner: No, not directly.

Q6 **Chair:** You saw the advert and applied on that basis.

Professor Dame Jessica Corner: Yes.

Q7 **Rebecca Long Bailey:** Thank you for coming to speak to us today. It is lovely to meet you in person.

You told us you were considering whether you can continue in your role as registrar to the Academy of Medical Sciences. Have you decided whether you will continue in that role?

Professor Dame Jessica Corner: From the point of view of time, it is not compatible because it needs a lot of time and means being an officer of the academy and a trustee of the charity on that basis. There are two things—the time point of view and whether there is some kind of conflict.

I have discussed it with the academy and, yes, I will be standing down. The main thing is to give the academy enough time to find a successor. If the Committee agrees, some sort of handover period to allow for that means there would be a little bit of an overlap, but I think that on both counts it would be important to stand down.

Q8 **Rebecca Long Bailey:** Could you summarise what you aim to achieve as executive chair of Research England?

Professor Dame Jessica Corner: Research England is four years old; it is a new body. I was very pleased to be on the first council of Research England, to see its formation and the first three years of setting up and establishment. I have been impressed by the work that Research England is doing and the way it has been embraced by and respected across the sector for what it is doing.

The first thing would be to carry on in that vein and enable Research England to continue the good work it is doing and work with a very strong team to carry on that work. There are some early priorities, one of which is that a strategic delivery plan is due. That needs to be finalised and published.

Another priority is the future research assessment programme, which is reviewing the research excellence framework, completed in May of this year, on what direction it should take for the next period. That is due to come to fruition by Christmas, or perhaps early in the new year, so being fully involved in the decisions around that and being sure that the sector is fully engaged and the recommendations are at one with it is a very important priority.



There is also the key role that Research England plays in relation to working with business and supporting the university sector to do that, and things like the commercialisation of intellectual property and how that works. So there is a whole other realm, and how the knowledge exchange framework is designed to go forward and how that might be linked to incentives, which may be the financial elements, is all to be decided.

I would look forward to working with the team on how to take forward those areas in order to work with Research England to support the university sector to deliver on some of the big priorities. How does the sector tie in to delivering on economic growth through innovation and science, the productivity challenge, the levelling-up challenge and so forth? It is very exciting to think I might be able to play a part in all of that.

Q9 Rebecca Long Bailey: You mentioned a few things, one of which was the future research assessment programme that you hope to roll out by the end of this year. What other priorities do you have for your first year in office?

Professor Dame Jessica Corner: I have just been setting out some of those. Do you mean specifically the first year and the future research assessment programme?

Rebecca Long Bailey: Yes.

Professor Dame Jessica Corner: The first priority is to help with the conclusion of all the work programmes that have been going on to look at the future. There has been a lot of consulting with the sector; there has been lots of analysis; there has been a look at what other countries do in assessment. It is bringing all of that to a conclusion in order to respond to the consultation and point the future direction.

What is being heard back is that there is not a particular appetite for some kind of rolling review or annual mechanism. I think the sector would prefer something similar to the current approach, which is a long-term or once-every-seven-years model.

There is no conclusion to that yet and it would not be right for me to say what it is here today, but it is about coming to a conclusion and giving very early indications to the university sector on what the next programme will look like, because it takes years for universities to build the kind of research that is assessed at the end of that process. If there is any change in direction, they need to be able to get organised to respond.

That is definitely an early priority, as well as making sure there is comfort with the direction and whatever else universities might need to put in place to be able to respond. I would say those are the first-year priorities.

Q10 Chris Clarkson: You highlighted the failure to maintain the dual support



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mechanism for research as a key challenge for Research England. I want to understand why you feel that is a key challenge and how you plan to address that.

Professor Dame Jessica Corner: It is very good that in the BEIS letter to Research England, confirmation of the 64p in the pound figure for dual support has been made as a statement for the next spending period. That is really good because it sets a direction and a stability for that.

Over the past years that fund, because it was flat, has become a bit eroded and the balance was just beginning to fall away a little bit. The pandemic has exposed the issue of research sustainability in universities and cross-subsidy of research from other sources. It is very important that there is full understanding of that and the resource is supported so there are not these tensions emerging in universities over what choices they are going to make in their building infrastructure or what support there is for students versus research and innovation just at a time when it is a very strong Government priority for science and innovation to be moving forward strongly.

Those are the challenges. It is about continuing to help that understanding but show the value of it and what it produces. I think Research England has some quite good mechanisms in place. There is more that can be done to bring that contribution to full visibility.

Q11 **Chris Clarkson:** How would you demonstrate that? Are there things in the existing model that you would change, or things on which you would focus?

Professor Dame Jessica Corner: The research assessment programme does bring forward impacts. That shows demonstrably where universities contribute to great outcomes for society, business, commercialisation and so forth through the impact element of the REF. There is a question about whether there is more to be done in that area in future.

There is constant work going on by Research England to gather up illustrative examples of the way the funds that are administered under the dual support mechanism are deployed by universities in this space and what comes out of it. More of that could be done to bring it to full visibility.

There is something interesting about the way the knowledge exchange framework is designed. There is constant annual surveying through the HE-BCI survey of the activities of universities in collecting data. A number of different things bring this insight through. I think it is a case of looking at all of that and asking what more could be done, working in a collaborative partnership with universities to do that.

Q12 **Chris Clarkson:** Would you say it is fair to say that the tools are already there and it is a case of assessing how they are best used, almost to promote the value that you add to that?



Professor Dame Jessica Corner: Exactly. The tools are there. Sometimes it is about wanting more tangible, immediate examples than some of the annual surveys, or seven-year-cycle assessments, produce. There is probably a bit more to be done in the space of tangible, on-the-ground examples that could be brought forward in short order to help understanding.

Q13 **Chris Clarkson:** Sticking with that theme, Research England got quite a significant increase in its spending power under the 2021 spending review. A key function of the role will be to demonstrate value for money and efficiency with public money. You mentioned the managing public money module, which you are hoping to take as part of your induction. How will you demonstrate that the public are getting bang for their buck? We are talking about these tangibles because some of these things are quite long-term projects, but people want to see results almost instantly. What challenges do you anticipate in the sector's ability to absorb the additional funding? Does having more to do come with its own challenges?

Professor Dame Jessica Corner: On your first question, there are lots of things that can be done, but it is always very important to have the data to hand to show value for money. As I have been describing, there are various things that help with that. Then there are specific schemes. The UKRPIF scheme is about capital infrastructure invested in areas. Wave seven of that programme has been announced, so the projects that will be invested in for that programme will be chosen over the next period.

That is a great example. A requirement of the scheme is that for every pound that Research England puts in there is an expectation of co-investment by industry and others for those capital investments. That scheme has definitely shown over time that that is absolutely happening.

The design of some of these schemes is very good for both stimulating that co-investment and showing that more comes of even that requirement in many cases, and showing exactly what they are doing. I think they fit very well with the priority around building research and innovation clusters in regions, for example. It will be very interesting to see which of the schemes we choose for the next round to help to drive that effect, and we need to monitor that that is indeed what is happening over a period of time.

Q14 **Chris Clarkson:** You have just touched on something on which I am very keen: levelling up. You mentioned it in your questionnaire. Obviously, research and development will form an important part of that levelling-up agenda. How will you ensure that the money you have is used in levelling up effectively in regions and areas where, for example, R&D is not already a priority, or perhaps is not funded to the same degree as it is in, say, the golden triangle?



Professor Dame Jessica Corner: There are two different approaches. One is the sort of scheme I was just describing where you can look at the best projects coming forward that deliver to that agenda and could have an important impact, with that perhaps being a dimension of how they are selected.

Another interesting thing has happened as a result of the 2021 research excellence framework. There was the requirement to include 100% of staff as far as possible in the exercise. Very interestingly, what it has revealed is that there is excellence in many places that we perhaps have not seen before, including many of the levelling-up regions. It has brought to the fore research excellence—some of it quite small and some of it larger.

The allocation of QR on the basis of that excellence has not yet been notified to universities—I have not seen it yet, obviously—but certainly the letter just provided to universities shows the way the model will work on a sectoral basis. It certainly looks like funding will flow to some of those areas on the basis of that, so QR will flow to the regions where they show excellence. There are different ways of doing it, but that is one of them and it is exciting to see.

Q15 **Chair:** As a fellow so-called red wall MP I am a big fan of levelling up, but how will you make sure it does not involve levelling down for some of our universities that lead the world at the moment?

Professor Dame Jessica Corner: It would be totally counterproductive if that happened. We need our strongest, world-leading institutions to go forward strongly, so if there is more to do in this area it is about levelling up and not levelling down anything; it is looking carefully at the way things like QR work to make sure there is not a destabilising effect in the way I have just shown.

I believe—I have not seen it yet—there has been quite a careful look at that to make sure that, however it is allocated, it does not deliver that effect and does not destabilise institutions that are already very strong and performed very well in the REF.

With some of the other initiatives, it does not preclude very strong institutions from benefiting from those schemes. That is also important.

Q16 **Graham Stringer:** The basis of the Nurse review of research was that the funding headings for all the different major sectors of research had become ossified. The Engineering Council always got “that percentage” of money year after year, and that was true of the other research councils.

How would you go about changing that? You can answer it in any way you like, but if you give more to physics there may be less for health, or vice versa. The cake is of limited size, which was why it became ossified. How would you go about judging between those different headings to give meaning to the basis of the Nurse review?



Professor Dame Jessica Corner: I think there are two drivers. One is that it is important to maintain a balance across the various disciplinary strengths. It might seem very easy to pick science and innovation and the shift towards STEM as being the direction of travel, but arts, humanities and cultural impact are all really important.

There is one thing about maintaining balance and being careful about change without ossifying it. Another layer to it is that the grand challenges to be addressed are increasingly interdisciplinary, so there is an important driver within UKRI to look at how funds are collectively used across those councils, even at UKRI level, to drive interdisciplinary work. That is the next stage of work to think about.

I think it is a challenging balancing act, but one that demonstrably cannot be stuck just as it is; otherwise, it looks as if it is not responding to what Sir Paul Nurse was trying to recommend.

Q17 **Graham Stringer:** I think he did recommend it. With all due respect, that is in a way avoiding the question.

Let me give you two examples. First, some time ago astronomy and PPARC lost out in financing; they were the exception to the ossification. If I make the case for astronomy to be given more money, how would you respond to that?

Secondly, to take a very different but real case, if you believe in the target of net zero by 2050, most of the assessments by engineers say that we do not have the amount of money going into engineering that will deliver that; we need a massive extra commitment to engineering.

Those are real examples. What would your answer be to those bids for extra money under the heads for astronomy and engineering?

Professor Dame Jessica Corner: In my current role—

Graham Stringer: I think the new role would be better.

Professor Dame Jessica Corner: In my current role I face that quite a lot on a daily basis. It is always a case of looking at how to satisfy different interests and to do it fairly and reasonably.

There is a huge need for funds to go towards the zero carbon challenge. I am sure that over time looking at how to meet that request will be necessary. Not all of it will come from Government; it also needs to come from co-investment from industry and so forth. That is a route to consider. How can that best be leveraged? How can UKRI funding assist in that challenge? Engineering colleagues are very used to working with that.

Another point I would make is that the social scientists are a key element to how we make the changes that will be required to deliver not just the technology but how people in society will use the technology. It is not necessarily just a case of shifting away from the social scientists to give it



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to the engineers in the simple way that maybe you have described it. Another matter that needs to be done is to put the case to Government for the funding that is needed, which may be a quantum more than is currently available.

- Q18 **Graham Stringer:** More money is always useful. I do not think I have ever heard a witness at any Select Committee say they can do their job with less money. They all say they want more money. Assuming the Government cannot produce more money, if you accept that the engineers and astronomers want more money, how would you deal not just with social science—maybe you have to deal with it—but other headings? One of the other headings is health. None of these research councils and research areas gets its money because it is rubbish; they are all doing something, but you have to prioritise. It is changing priorities. I am interested in how you would make those judgments.

Professor Dame Jessica Corner: As part of a team, obviously, because it would be the board and the executive committee of UKRI rather than me as executive chair of Research England.

- Q19 **Graham Stringer:** As executive chair you would be very influential.

Professor Dame Jessica Corner: Of course, and to some extent standing a little aside from the different disciplinary interests that might be around the table, but it is weighing up the different priorities and collectively coming to a conclusion about that.

The second element is that each of the councils makes contributions to those challenges, and when you add up each pound across the different contributions collectively that can be a better combined effort than perhaps just putting it through one of the research councils against one priority heading.

There are different mechanisms for achieving what you suggest. It is a process of analysis, prioritisation and looking at the best projects and initiatives that would add up to the direction of travel.

- Q20 **Graham Stringer:** Perhaps I may ask a different but related question. Within the bureaucracy of the research councils there has been explicit resistance to the setting up of ARIA on the basis that that money, which is new money going into ARIA, would be better spent on doing what you said: being put into research councils now. Where do you stand on that issue? Do you think that the money being given to ARIA is right, or would you like that money to go to you?

Professor Dame Jessica Corner: I am excited to see ARIA develop. It has a very different proposed way of working and it will add something to the mix. I am excited to see the appointments announced this week. Personally, I look forward to working with ARIA as it gets established and would look to form collaborative relationships. I am sure there would be much we could do together.



Q21 **Graham Stringer:** You have mentioned assessing research on the basis of impact. Do you believe it is possible at the start of a research project properly to assess impact? From some of our previous reports, I can give you a whole list of people who have said it is impossible to judge impact. The most prominent professor who came here and said that was Brian Cox, but many other professors have come here to say, "I do not know how to fill in the part of the form that is on impact." What is your response to that?

Professor Dame Jessica Corner: There are certain fundamental research projects and disciplines that do not start out thinking about the end use of the research being done by theoretical mathematicians, physicists and so forth. That is very good work. We need it and it is great that they are doing it. It is not necessarily the case that every researcher and academic is required to demonstrate the impact of their work at the outset. It may be generations before we know where that work is going to have an impact, yet it could be extremely important for future developments.

Having said that, there is much research that has extraordinary impact and it needs to be brought to visibility. I answered earlier questions about how we bring the value of this to full visibility. You are probably referring to the impact case study work in the research excellence framework where we ask academics to write case studies that are evidenced with the data to show how they have impacted.

It is perfectly possible for academics to be supported to do that job very well. It is usually not at the outset of a project; it is probably even some years after the conclusion of many research projects that you can see the actual chain of events that led to societal, economic or other kinds of benefit. Again, in my own institution we have provided academics with a lot of support to enable them to do that.

Q22 **Graham Stringer:** Chris asked about regional improvement in the amount of research. Oxford, Cambridge and, to a certain extent, UCL and Imperial are world-class universities; they are possibly better than all but two universities in the whole of Europe when it comes to research. One would not want to lose that, but Bristol, Manchester, Sheffield, Liverpool, Birmingham and Newcastle are on a par with the very best universities in the European Union. As I see it, the question is not how to avoid taking money away from the golden triangle; it is how you get those universities up to the standard of Oxford, Cambridge, Imperial and UCL. How do you do that?

Professor Dame Jessica Corner: Oxford, Cambridge and Imperial have been doing this for decades, and the effect of that development is over a very long time. That is one thing.

Graham Stringer: I should have mentioned Nottingham as well.



Professor Dame Jessica Corner: Thank you. I would like to mention it, too.

They have been doing it for a very long time, and the effect of that gathering of talent, the infrastructure and the co-investment by others is very long standing. I suppose one thing is it is a long game.

The second thing is that increased funding, of which there is now some coming in the spending review outcome, hopefully enables more support in that direction. On its own, it is not going to be enough to develop that parity that you describe. It is using the funds that are available to leverage in, as much as possible, other support from other sources.

It is also important to support collaboration between those universities, and not necessarily to think of them on their own. The University of Nottingham is one of the Midlands Innovation eight research-intensive universities, and that collaboration is very productive. When you add up their combined resource, effort and output, they are getting much closer to an Oxford or Cambridge outcome.

How could we enable that effect to be more productive, more collaborative and, I guess, more strategically brought together to help with that? It is early days for that sort of an effect, but, with the N8 universities and the Midlands one, that is beginning to happen, and I think it is very positive.

Q23 **Graham Stringer:** I said that was a final point, but I would just like to respond to what you said, and I would be interested in how you react to it.

I understand what you are saying. If you take a 60-year look at the balance between the golden triangle and other universities, and if you look at the number of Nobel prizes—I accept that it is a rough metric, but it is one that is used internationally—in the '50s and '60s the Sheffields and Manchesters were winning Nobel prizes. Recently, outside the golden triangle, I think only Nottingham and Manchester have picked up Nobel prizes. There is a case that the golden triangle has sucked in money that has reduced the international achievements of the other universities. It needs taking back to where it was rather than improving.

Professor Dame Jessica Corner: Yes, I would agree. If it is feasible, it is about growing the resource for the rest rather than taking the resource away from the already excellent, and it is a matter for Government to decide over time how that might be done.

There is some sort of erosion that possibly has gone on that you are describing. It would be great if we could reverse that, go forward strongly and make sure that that is distributed to excellence in regional settings where we also get the beneficial effect of building up clusters of innovation that create jobs and build strong economic development around the universities that are anchor institutions to that. It is a well-demonstrated effect that we should really try to support.



Nobel prizes: that is very interesting. Nottingham is one of them. I would love to think that there might be another one coming along in the same field, but we will have to see. That is about people like me supporting the development of excellence in institutions, and that is a leadership role that is important on the ground.

Graham Stringer: Thank you.

Q24 **Tracey Crouch:** It is lovely to meet you. Looking at your CV, thank you for all you have done throughout your career for cancer services. It is extremely important.

You mentioned university research and knowledge bringing social, economic and cultural benefits for all our citizens. We have also heard throughout our own inquiry into diversity and inclusion in STEM about the benefits that universities can bring to local communities. How do you think universities can bring further benefits to local communities?

Professor Dame Jessica Corner: Universities are very active in looking at their own locality and how they engage with that locality and issues around them. In all sorts of ways, they try to serve their local communities. It is measured by Research England through their annual survey of activity of universities. There are various levers to offer incentives and encourage that, and funding follows in the HEIF funding mechanism. I think it is very important.

A focus on community development is also important alongside what you might call the more technology and innovation-directed efforts. Our creative subjects are very important.

It is about how we support the development of skills locally around universities and how we think about the development of entrepreneurship, which fits into Research England programmes well. There are incentives as well as understanding what universities are already doing. Seeing where they are doing really innovative things and trying to spread that good practice to other universities is also a mechanism.

Research England has a scheme called the RED fund, which allows collaborative proposals to come forward from institutions to put forward projects that can be very much in this space. I am very excited that the two universities in Nottingham—Nottingham Trent University and the University of Nottingham—have recently been awarded one of these projects, which is called COL Lab, and it is about trying to support a route into doctoral training for people who would not normally come to universities to do that from the local community while prioritising questions that are of local concern that they would like answered through that programme.

It is very clever citizen science. What does the community want and need, how does that generate research questions, and how do people of that community come forward to train to be researchers of the future?



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There are 50 studentships jointly between the two universities. It will help to build Nottingham Trent University's capability in doing this sort of work from the already strong experience of the University of Nottingham. It is a great example of a scheme that stimulates this kind of work, and I would love to see more of that go forward over the next year, being executive chair.

Q25 Tracey Crouch: Do you have any initial views on diversity and inclusion within Research England and the partners that it works with?

Professor Dame Jessica Corner: I am very strongly committed to the equality and diversity agenda. I have led initiatives. I have tried to be a role model in that throughout my career. It is a strong component of different elements of the programmes that Research England follows, particularly the research excellence framework, and it needs to be in the future assessment programme design.

The evidence is that diverse teams create the best science and the best outcomes, and generate projects that are stronger than if they are not diverse. The sector has issues to address. Research England can contribute a lot by signalling this and designing it into various schemes so that it is incentivised, monitored and supported. So, yes, very much so.

Q26 Tracey Crouch: In your view, who are the people and the organisations that Research England should engage with most as it goes forward? Obviously, you have partnerships with businesses, universities and so on.

Professor Dame Jessica Corner: The university sector itself is very important, and it is day-to-day engagement. Understanding more about what the business sector needs in order to work more closely in a co-production model with universities and how we create that porosity of movement of individuals in careers between business and universities backwards and forwards is something that would be good to be talking about and working on.

We have not talked yet about the devolved Administrations. Research England funds research in England, but it is also responsible for research assessment across the whole of the UK and has a very important role in keeping close, very active contact and dialogue with the devolved Administrations about the different systems of working and making sure that they are working in concert rather than in some way out of balance or out of step with each other. It is an important role for the executive chair to keep that collaboration and dialogue very active, and I would be looking forward to doing it.

Q27 Tracey Crouch: And international partners?

Professor Dame Jessica Corner: Yes, absolutely. Working internationally is very important. Working with Europe, whatever the outcome of association, is important. Making sure that support is given and enabled to allow very strong, collaborative partnerships with the best in the world for the best initiatives and those settings that need support



and development in order to develop their capability and capacity is all very much part of the system.

Q28 Tracey Crouch: How would you anticipate Research England being involved in the conversations on alternative arrangements for Horizon Europe? I assume you are keen to see a plan B.

Professor Dame Jessica Corner: Yes. I believe there is the publication of the early transition arrangements plan today.

One of the ways in which Research England can be very helpful is providing intelligence back to decision makers around how universities are experiencing problems on the ground in relation to the delay at the moment, which is causing a lot of problems for academics and projects, and the loss, potentially, of capabilities that are being disrupted at the moment and the potential future design of the plan B schemes as they go forward.

It may be that Research England will distribute some of the sustainability funding that might be put in place rapidly to support any transition that might happen that goes down the plan B line. I would look forward to being very active in that space. Research England itself does not design the answer. That is not its role, particularly because its focus is on England. This is a whole-UK policy matter.

Q29 Tracey Crouch: Finally, what lessons do you think that Research England can learn from covid-19?

Professor Dame Jessica Corner: There are many. There are important lessons that were exposed through the pandemic around sustainability of research because of the financial and other disruptions that happened. They were quite exposed. There are things to learn from that and make sure that we try to design a system that does not create those vulnerabilities and builds resilience for the future.

There are great lessons to learn about the agility of being able to pivot towards a huge crisis where science and innovation across all the spectrum of disciplines could contribute the answers—and it demonstrably did. UKRI was absolutely instrumental in finding ways to, in an agile way, shift funds towards that work, including the open science agenda, which Research England has great interest in. The switch to rapid publication before peer review of all the things we were finding out about SARS-CoV-2 as we found them in real time and putting that out into the international public open domain was critical. There are lots of things to learn and gather up for the future.

Q30 Tracey Crouch: You mentioned open science, but are there any other positives that you think we can build on as a consequence of covid?

Professor Dame Jessica Corner: Another positive is that we have all learned to work in a digital, online, virtual environment in ways that we would not have made that transition as quickly before. We are learning



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about what we want to keep and what we want to go back to. Being able to work in a very agile, fast way, which includes things like data and how you share data, is really underpinning to discovery for the future.

We also learned, going back to some earlier points, that social and behavioural matters were critical to thinking about how we direct and support changes in public behaviour. Maybe we were not as fast at focusing on some of those necessary understandings as we were about the fundamental understanding of how to treat a disease. That is a learning. We need to think about what resilience and strength we need in those areas for the future.

Tracey Crouch: Thank you.

Q31 **Chair:** Thank you, Tracey. I have a couple of final questions. As I said at the start of the session, ARIA has appointed this week its first chair and chief exec. It will be giving out public money for research. What working relationship do you imagine that Research England will have with ARIA going forward?

Professor Dame Jessica Corner: That will be an early conversation and one that I really look forward to. I think its programmes will be very rapidly developed at technologies. There will inevitably be in universities a balancing of support that will come from Research England's dual support funding. There is something about understanding how the two mechanisms sit side by side. It may be that there are very exciting pieces of work that ARIA will be pursuing that there may be an alignment to sit alongside, and vice versa. There is everything to play for and start that conversation early.

Q32 **Chair:** The idea is explicitly that ARIA funds the sorts of things that perhaps you would not, but you could see opportunities to piggyback one way or the other.

Professor Dame Jessica Corner: Absolutely, there could be. It may be that it will take a little time to see the absolute outcomes of the ARIA early investments. They are meant to be directed to rapid development, but it will be a little time before we see quite what they are going to produce. It is a case of keeping open the approach and monitoring it very carefully, and, wherever possible, working in partnership.

Q33 **Chair:** Thank you. Finally, you have served on the council of Research England for a few years, and, from your answers this morning, you are obviously proud of the work you do. Therefore, to some extent, you are a continuity candidate. What is the one thing you would change?

Professor Dame Jessica Corner: It is probably too early for me to know that because you really need to get into an organisation and sit alongside it and see how it is working and get more immersion into the direction that is planned.



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The one area that I would pick out—and it is the subject of a review at the moment—is bureaucracy and burden, and Research England is very live to that. In the design of any schemes that go forward, including the future REF, we need to be very conscious of trying to reduce that because it releases time, effort and funding to go to the great innovation and science that we are looking for.

The sector is also saying, “Do not do that at the expense of really assessing excellence.” There is a balance in this. That would be one area where I would want to look to say that we really have to make sure that we are not imposing an unnecessary burden on the sector.

Chair: Thank you, Dame Jessica. You have been extremely generous with your time and your answers this morning. I know the Committee is all very grateful. Thank you for attending today.