



Select Committee on Science and Technology

Corrected oral evidence: Science research funding in universities

Tuesday 4 June 2019

11.50 am

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Members present: Lord Patel (The Chairman); Lord Hunt of Chesterton; Lord Kakkar; Lord Mair; Baroness Manningham-Buller; Baroness Morgan of Huyton; Lord Oxburgh; Baroness Young of Old Scone.

Evidence Session No. 4

Heard in Public

Questions 24 – 30

Witnesses

Professor Roger Kain CBE FBA, Vice-President for Research and Higher Education Policy, British Academy; Professor Julia Buckingham CBE, President-Elect, Universities UK.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

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Examination of witnesses

Professor Roger Kain and Professor Julia Buckingham.

Q24 **The Chairman:** Good morning and thank you for coming today to give evidence to us. I am sorry that we kept you waiting; we slightly overran the first session. Before we start, please introduce yourselves so that we have on the record who you are, and if you represent anybody, who it is. If you have any opening statements to make, feel free to do so and then we will get on to the questions.

Professor Roger Kain: I am vice-president for research and higher education policy at the British Academy, which is the UK's national academy for the humanities and social sciences.

I will make a few brief points by way of opening. First, the British Academy welcomes the decision to move towards 2.4% of GDP for research by 2027, with aspirations beyond and the fact that, from autumn 2017, the national productivity investment fund started the process. It would be good if there was a road map as soon as possible to identify the issues along the way to achieving that figure.

Secondly, on Brexit, we hope for the closest possible association with the EU if the UK leaves, not so much for the money that would otherwise be lost but, most importantly, to ensure that the collaboration, the networks that have built up over many years and the movement of staff between countries can be facilitated. We are engaged with Professor Adrian Smith in his work to identify a way of ensuring that if we are not able to associate.

Thirdly, we would welcome the Government taking a long-term view of research funding, particularly and importantly in relation to the relationship between the two essential legs of public funding: quality-related—QR—and the research councils. We are aware that the UK punches way above its weight in research performance—second to the US across the board. In my areas of the humanities and social sciences, a recent report to BEIS has shown that in the social sciences we are top of the 10 comparator countries and in the humanities top in all but one.

Fourthly, UKRI is under review. I expect that we will talk about that. I will say no more about it now.

Fifthly, we now have Philip Augar's report on fees. We in the academy welcome the fact that further and higher education will now be viewed as a system, but we feel that it is unwise to damage HE by moving money from HE to further education, although we understand absolutely that further education has historically been underfunded.

Professor Julia Buckingham: I am vice-chancellor and president of Brunel University London, but I am here in my capacity as president-elect of Universities UK. I endorse everything that Professor Kain has just said. Universities UK is extremely proud of the UK's world-leading position in research. We recognise the essential role of research in ensuring economic prosperity and global competitiveness. It is critical that we go

on building that strength if we are to deliver the 2.4% of GDP by 2027 and extend it to 3% in later years.

To achieve this ambition, sustained investment in research funding is critical, including in QR, and we have to make sure that we have the capacity in our universities to build the talent pipeline that we need. Crucial to that is the Augar review. In the view of Universities UK, it is essential that the Augar review in no way threatens research or the critical interface between research and education. We are seeing an increasing divide between them, which concerns me enormously. The role of research in education is critical, as is that of education in research.

Q25 The Chairman: You are quite right; we have some questions about the Augar review and your views on it. I know that you spoke yesterday, Professor Buckingham, at the Royal Society meeting.

You referred to QR funding. What impact do think decreasing the ratio of QR funding to research council funding would have on universities' ability to deliver on research?

Professor Julia Buckingham: As you rightly say, QR funding has been flat over the past 10 years, while there has been roughly a 3% per year increase in research council funding. We of course welcome the increase in research council funding, but the shifting ratio of QR to research council funding is a problem, because universities are dependent on QR to support infrastructure, to allow for strategic developments in research, to build capacity and to pump-prime areas that are not quite ready for funding.

All those areas are key. If we undermine QR, we will have problems with interdisciplinary research and curiosity-driven research, which in some areas it is quite challenging to get funding for. We will have problems, too, in attracting and retaining our talented researchers, which is increasingly important as the global field becomes ever more competitive, and in developing research infrastructure and facilities.

Professor Roger Kain: I agree with all those points, but perhaps I may make a more partisan point. The humanities and social sciences are highly dependent on QR funding, probably in the ratio of 80% of research funding from QR to 20% from the research councils. For many types of research, in the humanities in particular, project funding is not an appropriate route. QR is a vital funding stream for paying for staff time to conduct research in humanities.

QR is important for all areas of research, because it is one of the funding streams that universities have open to them to make up the gap between the full economic costs of research and the amounts repaid by research councils and by government departments. There is a gap of around 20%, if not more, in the cost of research. That cost has to be made up from some point.

In terms of strategic developments within universities, if there is one area which it is vital that universities progress on it is encouraging interdisciplinary approaches to research and to teaching. QR in a

university is an important funding stream to pump-prime some of the interdisciplinary developments that can then play into the grand challenges faced by the UK in relation to which the research councils and their challenge funds have opportunities.

Q26 **Lord Kakkar:** I now turn to the question of UKRI. Since its formation, how has it affected the research base and the nature of research and of funding that you are able to attract in universities?

Professor Roger Kain: First, one has to say that it is early days for UKRI. The national academies welcome UKRI because of the obvious opportunity to break down some of the silos that may have existed previously. Certainly UKRI, with its “across” strategy, has to be the way to go. That follows from what I have just said about the importance of interdisciplinary research and the grand challenges needing sciences, technology, medicine, but also the humanities and the social sciences, if they are to be addressed.

UKRI is looking at its internal workings at the moment, and we will be ready to play into that. We are concerned about the fact that the humanities and social sciences, with about 52% of the academics in the UK, have at their disposal just 9% of UKRI’s research council funding flowing through the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Economic and Social Research Council.

We would be the last to argue against the importance of STEM subjects and the expense of STEM and medicine, but we feel that the proportion of funding available through UKRI for humanities and social sciences is too small. The EU, for example, sets a ring-fence of 20% around the arts, humanities and social sciences for its Horizon programmes. We in the UK have an actual figure of 9%. It would not require the move of huge sums of money—£350 million from the £7 billion of UKRI funding—towards the humanities and social sciences, and would be absolutely transformative. We would urge the review to look at that balance, as well as maintain the balance between QR and challenge project funding.

Lord Kakkar: Which would you suggest is the priority?

Professor Roger Kain: The priority has to be QR. We can be absolutely clear about that because of its importance across the whole research spectrum, from the arts through to the sciences, for all the reasons that Professor Buckingham gave, including universities’ need to have at their disposal a block grant that is unhypothecated, which they can use according to their particular strategies. Universities in the UK are a very heterogeneous group of organisations, from teaching-intensive through to research-intensive. They are located in different parts of the country where there are different local needs. That flexibility is vital.

That is my first point. Second would come the rebalance.

Professor Julia Buckingham: I would definitely support the need to invest in QR. It is critical that universities have the capacity to use funds strategically to invest in areas where they know that they can compete effectively. Of course, it is different in different types of universities. We

have seen from the last REF and the RAE before that that some smaller universities have pockets of excellence in research that we should protect and develop, and they have often had very important roles in their local communities. Building expertise to support R&D in those companies is extremely important. Bigger universities have different problems.

To go back to our earlier points about arts and humanities versus social sciences and science, I would not want to get into a great argument, but it is very important that we have a strategic balance and recognise that if we do not invest in the arts, humanities and social sciences we will lose in itself but we will also lose our capacity to do truly interdisciplinary research. The more we see science, medicine and engineering developing, the more we need to understand the social impact on our society. Making sure that we are developing all angles of our research is very important.

One further thing that I would comment on is that through UKRI we have had increased investment in what we would call applied research to support the Government's industrial strategy. That is very good and I support it. It is, however, very important that we continue to invest in fundamental science. Otherwise, in 10 or 20 years' time we will have nothing to translate into economic benefit.

I do not suggest that UKRI is not doing that. I have heard Mark Walport talk with passion about the importance of investing in fundamental research. I sometimes think that the message does not get out. Among my colleagues, I hear: "Oh, I don't think I'd ever get grant support for that". That is very worrying, because it is important that we have the right message going out to colleague so that they feel empowered to be writing good applications.

Lord Kakkar: Do you sense that the UKRI's current balance with regard to those specific initiatives versus what would be considered the traditional research council approach to funding is appropriate?

Professor Julia Buckingham: It is too early to say. We are in very early days of UKRI. We have seen some great initiatives with the industrial challenge strategy fund, the global challenges fund, et cetera. I am more concerned about the messaging, because we hear a lot about these new funds, which are great. It has done some other excellent stuff. The programme for potential leaders is a wonderful piece of work. We need to develop our young researchers and make sure that we have people who will be the PIs of the future and really drive research. That is a great programme.

Lord Kakkar: One further point. There is a current review of how the Government might fulfil their commitment to replace European Research Council funding in future. Do you think that using UKRI as a mechanism to deliver that would be appropriate, or should it be delivered through a different mechanism?

Professor Julia Buckingham: I would want to understand the different mechanisms properly before I answered a question like that.

Professor Roger Kain: There are two dimensions to EU funding. There is discovery funding, which comes largely through the European Research Council and the Marie Skłodowska-Curie schemes. In our response to Adrian Smith's consultation, we have argued that there is a very strong case for maintaining the independence of the discovery component of EU funding from UKRI. We feel that UKRI is the appropriate organisation to oversee the thematic approaches to funding, but that discovery funds would be better managed, overseen and governed by a body independent and on which all four national academies have a role. All four stand ready to do that if that is one of the outcomes.

As Professor Buckingham has been saying, it is important to ensure that the messaging is right. The message at present with European funding is that excellence is the real criterion for decisions. We would want to see that continue.

Q27 **Baroness Young of Old Scone:** Many universities collaborate with industry and other external bodies to put together the packages that support research and collaborations. We have so many factors coming into play at the moment that it is difficult to tell what is driving what, but what is your perception of any additional challenges arising in the area of collaboration with industry or other external bodies?

Professor Roger Kain: My first point is about the need for long-term planning to give private investment the security that the kind of activities that they want to be involved in in universities, whether engineering or medical laboratories or the people with whom they want to associate, will be there and will be funded. There is a need for long-term assurance that the opportunities that are currently available will continue to be available. That is easy to say at the moment in a landscape of such huge uncertainty, but anything that the Government can do to reduce that uncertainty will be good for business confidence in investing in research and collaboration with universities.

Professor Julia Buckingham: There are still issues with the ways in which universities and businesses work with one another, because there are still some misunderstandings on both sides of the argument. Sometimes, we get into a lot of detail about intellectual property, which can put businesses off working with universities. Universities need to become savvier in the way they deal with those arguments.

It can also be difficult for businesses to penetrate universities. That is particularly true for SMEs; if they are very tiny, a university can seem a large and difficult organisation to get into. The work that came out of the Dowling review in 2015, which suggested having specific contact points either in a university or regionally, was a big step forward. However, we still have a lot of work to do to make that work so that small, local companies can get those sorts of benefits.

Baroness Young of Old Scone: Do you think that UKRI needs to do anything to help set up collaborations and encourage business to be part of that collaboration process?

Professor Julia Buckingham: Anything that supports knowledge exchange funding has to be helpful. The things we have seen with the UK Research Partnership Investment Fund for big capital projects, for example, have brought significant amounts of industrial funding into universities and enabled really successful partnerships.

My own university benefited from two of those grants. One enabled us to set up a postgraduate research laboratory in Cambridge with TWI, which enables engineers to do their research in an industrial setting so that they get a really strong understanding of what research in industry is all about and how it is applied. That has been very successful.

The other centre is on my campus in west London. It centres on metals research and is enabling us to take very basic science and scale it up to productivity. We are going from very basic concepts right the way through to production. I am hopeful that we will have a further announcement about that before too long.

Q28 Lord Hunt of Chesterton: Is the level of funding affecting the amount of non-public funding universities can attract? In considering this, could you tell us a little about the kind of networks that exist in Europe? There is funding from the European Commission, but there are all sorts of organisations in Europe—bottom-up organisations for geographers, environmentalists, or whatever.

To what extent is there similarity between the non-official sources of income in the humanities, engineering and so on? I feel that there are differences in different countries. Britain has now become very successful at getting money out of the European Commission—perhaps too successful. Do we have an appropriate approach for what may happen if there is a significant reduction in funding from the European Commission?

Professor Roger Kain: If we set money aside for a moment, the really important thing that we must try to protect at all costs is the ability of academics to move both ways across borders. In Germany, for example, there are the Max Planck institutes. They offer a different way of funding research from what we have in this country, but there are opportunities there. A number of Max Planck institutes are directed by academics from the UK. I am highlighting, but that is the kind of thing that is at risk because of where we are going.

The role of public funding varies hugely across Europe. I strongly believe that our dual-support system is one of the reasons why we are so successful relative to the amount of public money that we put in. We have talked about it before, but the combination of project funding and block funding that is there for universities to use strategically gives us a huge edge over many countries.

Lord Hunt of Chesterton: Will that continue if we leave the EU? That is my question.

Professor Roger Kain: The UK's funding will continue. We will be able to backfill the cash lost from EU funding streams. The worry is whether we will still be able to attract academics to this country, and whether our

academics will still be able to go across into Europe, to maintain the networks. It is those networks and the people who produce the research that go on to help build economies. The money is an important means to that, but the people are absolutely essential.

Professor Julia Buckingham: I hope very much that if we do not have the money in future there will be a mechanism by which the UK can produce the money. I am not sure that we are quite sure of that yet.

Networks are unbelievably important. They take a very long time to build, but are destroyed very easily. I am really concerned about what will happen to our networks going forward. What we often do not appreciate is how what happens in one network spreads into another. You may be working on a research project in Germany and meet other people and link things up. Those links carry on forming the whole time; it is like a complex spider's web. It is quite difficult to describe, but the value to research is absolutely enormous.

Being able to say to one of your students, "I think you ought to go and do a postdoc with X, because it would be really good for your career development," and having those links to help students and postdocs on their way, and vice versa, oil the works of research. I suspect that we do not think enough about the fundamental oiling that makes things work. Researchers are people, and we need to look after them.

Lord Hunt of Chesterton: I agree. My great-grandfather went to Munich to do his experiments. That was in 1880.

Professor Roger Kain: Let us hope that in 2080 people will still be saying things like that.

Professor Julia Buckingham: Absolutely. Our great-great-grandchildren will be there.

The Chairman: We move on to the important issue of the Augar review and the implications it may have on universities' ability to develop and deliver on research. Professor Buckingham, I know you spoke at length on this yesterday. Maybe you will have an opportunity to bring out some of the key points you made last night.

Q29 **Baroness Morgan of Huyton:** In a sense, the questions on this are obvious. It would be helpful if you could summarise what the funding landscape is like now, and the effect of reducing fees to £7,500 if it was not backfilled by the Treasury. That is the first package.

The other issue is the proposal to look at costs subject by subject, as well as each subject's notional social and economic value to students and taxpayers. What do you think the effect of going down that path would be, and what is your reaction to it?

Professor Julia Buckingham: I will start with the funding and use the TRAC data as my basis. We all know that TRAC is not an exact science, but it gives us an approximation, and year on year the pattern is quite similar. We know from the most recent TRAC data, which I think is from last month, that on home and EU undergraduates we roughly break even.

I think we are just a few pounds below £9,250 if you look at the average. On international students, we make a significant surplus. We make a rather smaller surplus on other activities—the commercial activities at universities—and we make a very significant loss on research.

Without doubt, a lot of cross-subsidy goes on between our activities. This happens between research and education, between departments and pretty much everywhere. That is a feature of how universities run, and I think it is a value of their autonomy. If you reduce funding in any one area, you will get what I would call a domino effect. There are potentially all sorts of unintended consequences of pulling one lever and thinking that you can compartmentalise it like that, because the world does not work like that.

The proposal is to reduce the baseline fee from £9,250 down to £7,500 but to make up the funds. They should be targeted in the way they are made up, so that low-cost subjects got no addition, high-cost subjects got much more and medicine got the most. There is a big question about whether you can precision-engineer a university in that way. That is an interesting area to pursue.

A greater concern is if that money is not made up. In current-day values, it equates to about £1.8 billion a year. Of course, it will go only upwards with inflation. Unless we have a cast-iron guarantee that that funding will be replaced and increased with inflation and that there will be funding for what will be a growing population of 18 year-olds from 2021, there will be a funding gap.

What does that mean? Universities will start looking to cut costs in all sorts of different ways. It could impact on education, student experience, staff numbers, infrastructure and research. Every university will have a different cocktail.

In my view, what is lacking in the Augar review is a real analysis of the interplay between research and education. Engineering, natural sciences, biomedical and medical sciences, design, art—even modern languages, because they require infrastructure—are practical subjects. Unless we are able to teach the practical, we will not produce the practical people who we keep being told industry and the economy are looking for. That in itself is a major problem.

We are also going to devalue our research-led education. What does that mean? In my view, it is the way we instil what I think a university education is really about: it is about inspiring people and getting them to look at evidence, to realise that the world is not black and white, to analyse and be critical of data, and to develop logical and evidence-based arguments to solve problems. Whether you are reading English or engineering, you acquire those very generic skills at university.

I think that is what employers look for when they talk about graduate skills, the skills that we will all take forward in our careers. That basket of skills is incredibly important. Of course if you are an engineer you will need to be able to do engineering things and your specialist qualifications. We also get those broader skills.

Through research-led education, you inspire the next generation of researchers. If we are really looking to drive forward—I think Chris Skidmore said that we need 230,000 more researchers to deliver the 2.4%—we as universities must inspire our young people in research and encourage them to pursue master's degrees and PhDs. Otherwise, we will not fill that skills gap.

Professor Roger Kain: The British Academy has been conducting a review of teaching in the context of research. We will publish a report very imminently, and I will ensure that a copy is sent to your Lordships for your information.

Returning to the funding gaps, one of the biggest gaps in cost recovery in universities relates to the training of postgraduate research students: the recovery rate there is around 47%. It is at the point of fragility. Our message to UKRI would be to look carefully at the funding of postgraduate research students for the future, bearing in mind what Professor Buckingham has said about the need for 230,000 more academics. They have to come from somewhere, through the pipeline of research students and on into early career positions and lecturers.

I am very concerned about the very narrow focus on value being in economic terms only.

Baroness Morgan of Huyton: However that is measured.

Professor Roger Kain: I think it is measurable. That is the easy way but not necessarily the right way through. It is very important that universities understand the costs of delivering subjects. I do not think they necessarily do. The kinds of data collected by HESA are for cost centres that are not always most appropriate. There is the difficulty brought about by the very good interdisciplinary teaching going on: how do you cost this, from places such as UCL where there is an interdisciplinary bachelor's degree, through to the interdisciplinary teaching components across the science, humanities and social science programmes in probably every university?

Understanding costs is not easy. To value simply on income returns is a worry when we have so many groups that are so important to UK society—nurses, social workers, people who work in charities, teachers—who will find that it could be regressive for them if the Augar review proposals are implemented. They will be the losers having to pay back their fees over a 40-year period. I do not think that is how we hope the United Kingdom will lead itself through to the future.

I urge the Government to look very closely and carefully at those dimensions of the Augar review. Having said that, as I said in my opening statement, to have further and higher education conceived of as a system is very good and long overdue. That is a very important recommendation coming through from Philip Augar's report. The problem for me is the narrow focus on the economic returns of education.

Lord Mair: The Augar review recommended that the Government should make up the shortfall that goes with the fee cut from £9,250 to £7,500, but many of us clearly have concerns that that may not happen. In this

case, can I ask about international students? A lot of universities will say, "One way we can make up the shortfall is to increase the number of international students". Can we get your views on that?

Professor Julia Buckingham: I do not have access to the data, but I understand that the OfS data suggests that every university is planning to increase its international students. If you are taking a snapshot view, it is probably the easiest way of trying to drive up income when facing a deficit in other areas.

How can we ensure that we are going to remain truly competitive internationally? We have to ask ourselves that question. We should not be blind to how competition is growing in other parts of the world. In the last couple of years, we have seen Australia move into second place as the most attractive destination for international students and Canada rise up the league table quite quickly. I have just come back from a visit to China and was amazed to find how many degrees are now being taught in English. Of course, they have fantastic facilities. They, too, are looking to increase their number of international students.

We have to be very sure that we are doing everything we can to protect the quality of the education we offer, which is excellent. We have to make sure that we retain that excellence if we are to remain competitive in the international market.

Professor Roger Kain: We also need to retain and build an openness to the world and potential students. That is in danger of being damaged by some of the issues facing the UK at the moment. We should also be aware that there are now an increasing number of universities on the continent of Europe that are also teaching through the medium of English.

So the kind of backstop that we had, which was that we could provide an excellent education through the medium of English, is no longer such a unique selling point. I very much support Professor Buckingham on the need for us to be aware of that, and to be cognisant of the fact that anecdotally there are some very heroic assumptions about the growth of international student numbers in the business plans of some universities. We should not assume that those will be achieved and that therefore the amount of money that is moving out of fee income will be made up in that way. That is a heroic assumption.

Professor Julia Buckingham: Being attractive to international students is critical. At the moment, of course, we are seeing Australia and Canada in particular offering very attractive opportunities for post-study work. The fact that we have a very restricted post-study work visa is a major issue for a number of international students who very much want to stay here and work for a while before they go back home. We keep talking about our skills shortages; we have trained those people and it would be really great if we could enjoy their talents as well.

Lord Mair: Is there any issue over the question of UK students? If there were a significant increase in international undergraduate students, might that have a bearing on places or opportunities for UK students?

Professor Julia Buckingham: I suspect that one would have to look at individual universities. We need to be careful that classes are appropriately mixed, and I think most universities try to do this. In some disciplines, that can be quite difficult. Electrical engineering, for example, is very popular with Chinese students but rather less popular with British students, and in my former institution we had a very large number of Chinese students taking those courses.

That can be a difficulty. Universities have to work very hard to make sure that they have a truly international community. It is not "international students and us" but a recognition that we have a very heterogeneous population of students. The diversity of the culture that we have on campus is one of the really enriching parts of a university education, and perhaps it is something that we do not talk about enough.

Lord Hunt of Chesterton: One of the emerging questions, which you touched on earlier, is the business of intellectual property. The culture of intellectual property is somewhat different in China. When I went there, I showed them a movie that I had made. By that afternoon, the movie had been sliced and diced up and put out there. That was horrendous but very interesting. We do not even begin to think like that. However, there are some advantages in the different ways in which they think of data. This seems to be an area on which the Royal Academy might have a strong position and ideas.

Professor Roger Kain: The national academies have conducted work on intellectual property, and we have concerns over the fact that there are no real international overarching definitions that we could all work to. To bring people together is important. Intellectual property is vital; it is important that those who have invested in it can exploit it and therefore get some return on their investment in universities or wherever.

At the same time, we want knowledge to be internationally available. Open science is very important. Open science and intellectual property can sometimes seem to be in tension, but we are working very hard to develop ways in which that tension can be reduced.

Lord Hunt of Chesterton: Does this connect to the role of UKRI? It seems as if that should be a consideration.

Professor Roger Kain: In the sense that UKRI is increasingly working internationally, yes, with the kinds of schemes that it has to bring people in. In the context of the ODA schemes that are bringing people into this country and see us sending people out, a unified system of intellectual property would make all that so much easier and would get away from issues that we have at the moment such as the spats between the US and China, us and China or whatever. Those are unnecessary and damaging for everyone. That is the issue. If we could get some international alignment, that would be very welcome.

Q30 **Baroness Manningham-Buller:** We have heard a view that EU funding, as it presently works, funds areas of research that are tricky for people to get money in. I am not sure that I agree with that, but it is a view.

What do you think the implications will be across the piece for research, in science as well as the humanities and other areas, of the disappearance of those funds and their not being made up by the Government? Will it mean that important areas of research are not funded on the current basis?

Professor Roger Kain: Research that is tricky to fund is an interesting concept. One of the huge advantages of a number of the EU schemes that are currently open to UK researchers is the fact that decisions are made solely on the basis and on the criterion of excellence. Excellent research, discovery research that is peer-reviewed and comes through as excellent, is fundable.

Baroness Manningham-Buller: That is on the same basis as the UK funds, though.

Professor Roger Kain: It is on the same basis as the UK funds, but it is not the basis on which it is funded everywhere. The loss of that will be difficult to make up.

Professor Julia Buckingham: I would agree with that. I was going to make the same point, so I have nothing further to add.

The Chairman: Professor Buckingham and Professor Kain, thank you very much for coming to help us with this inquiry. This has been most useful, particularly your comments about the Augar review.

Professor Roger Kain: Thank you for hearing us, your Lordships.