



**Unites response to the House of Commons Innovation,
Universities, Science and Skills Committee's call for
supplementary evidence, Putting science and engineering at the
heart of government policy,
April 2000**

This response is submitted by Unite the Union, the UK's largest trade union with 2 million members across the private and public sectors. The union's members work in a range of sectors including financial services, print, media, construction, local government, education, health, not for profit and manufacturing which makes up a substantial component of our overall membership.

Unite is the main union representing Higher Education scientific technicians and academic related staff in the UK and Republic of Ireland. This, along with its considerable membership in manufacturing, makes it a major stakeholder in all decisions around science, technology and engineering related policy and funding.

Introductory Comments

- 1.1 Unite welcomes the opportunity to provide input into this debate and to provide additional oral evidence if necessary.
- 1.2 Our response to the Governments, and more particularly Lord Drayson's comments of February 4th 2009, *"Has the time come for the UK – as part of a clear economic strategy – to make choices about the balance of investment in science and innovation to favour those areas in which the UK has clear competitive advantage?"*, is as follows.
- 1.3 Unite sees a danger in concentrating on cutting edge innovation, as it perceives is implied by such comments, as it may mean traditional areas of manufacturing in which Unite operates would receive less Government R & D support. This, during recessionary times when existing UK manufacturing enterprises need all the support they can get to recapture their competitive edge through the development of more efficient and effective technologies. Technologies for which UK organisations not only hold the intellectual property rights, but from which they can in turn commission, utilising existing upgraded local assets and trained staff to produce, green desirable products for global markets.

- 1.4 Unite would like to see the Government adopt an approach similar to that of the French where they greatly value their existing manufacturing industries. An approach that demonstrates the UK Government truly does put science and engineering at the heart of government policy, ensuring not only the survival, but healthy growth of existing UK endeavours. One that would ensure announcements such as Reading University's closure of its physics department in 2010, resulting from the trend towards marketisation of education, are not only reversed but never repeated and are replaced by announcements of the expansion of such facilities.

Key Issues Which the Committee Seeks to Address

- 2.1 What **form** a debate or consultation about the question should take and who should lead it?

The debate should be conducted along existing lines and must continue to ensure input from key stakeholders such as workers, from both from R & D and manufacturing organisations/firms, along with their trade union representatives. However, research councils and trade associations such as Institute of Electrical Engineers (IEE), Institute of Chemical Engineers (IChemie) should also be consulted.

- 2.2 Whether such a **policy is desirable or necessary?**

Such a policy is not only desirable, but essential, if the UK is to pull itself out of the recession and approach the future in a strategic way so as to develop, through targeted R & D, a sustainable balanced economy built around our existing / enhanced infrastructure and skills base. However, it is where the policy is aimed that is most important. Too much emphasis on blue sky research opens up a potential rift with existing industrial sectors that, if left out, will result in other international competitors taking up those industrial and research opportunities with a threat to UK Ltd jobs and industrial sectors.

- 2.3 What the potential **implications of such a policy are** for UK science and engineering, higher education, industry and the economy as a whole?

The potential implications of getting such a policy right are massive as proper policy will ensure research institutions are funded appropriately so as to focus on, not only fundamental science, but also applied science which assists companies, particularly in the labour intensive manufacturing sectors, to grow and diversify in order to satisfy identified demand. An entire focus on cutting edge innovation, at the expense of identifying innovative technologies for existing enterprises, lessens our ability to achieve a balanced economy and puts at risk existing enterprises and the jobs and skills they provide which require substantial R & D in order to maintain their competitive edge and ability to diversify.

2.4 Were such a policy pursued, **which research sectors are most likely to benefit and which are most likely to lose?**

Policies which only seek to focus research resources on so called priority fields, at the expense of enhancing existing manufacturing resources through applied research to develop/refine processes and products for existing and new markets, would not only result in a decline in these research fields but would also result in an even greater/corresponding decline in the often labour intensive and important manufacturing sector. Whilst the beneficiaries may well be research sectors like Medical Research, such an approach would ultimately result in a less diversified, less stable economy.

Conclusion / Recommendations

3.1.1 Unite sees the real issue here as not necessarily one of picking winners, although some element of this may be necessary, but one which supports and enhances existing enterprise, and the jobs it provides/creates, through R & D that assists it to maintain a competitive advantage to meet the demands of both existing and new global markets. Such an all encompassing approach seeks to develop a balanced economy which doesn't throw the old out for the new, but which embraces science and engineering wholeheartedly in government policy to ensure our progression out of recession and into sustainable economic growth.

3.1.2 Unite sees this approach as not only adopting the five key principles of science policy addressed by Lord Drayson in his speech of February 4th 2009, along with his three criteria for identifying those areas for greatest focus, but one which adopts a fourth and critical criteria which seeks to utilise and upgrade existing local assets and trained staff to produce green desirable products for global markets. In the future every job may be audited as to whether it is a "green" job. That does not mean existing occupations are thrown away but rather the investment in new greener technologies are also used to uplift and enhance traditional skill mixes in a modern environment.

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