

Report of a “Town Hall” meeting convened by the Royal Society to discuss the draft strategy for a merged ICSU/ISSC

The Royal Society, 24 May, 2017

Chair: Richard Catlow, Foreign Secretary and Vice President, the Royal Society

Summary

The Society is the UK national member of ICSU and pays an annual subscription of £145K, funded from the core grant made by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. The Society convened a Town Hall meeting of 35 stakeholders (mostly from UK-based institutions / scientific unions) to discuss the proposed merger of ICSU and ISSC on 24 May 2017. Overall, there was strong support for the essential purpose of the proposed new organisation, though support was not universal and doubts were expressed about whether the activities that would carry forward the purpose were sufficiently focussed or could be credibly delivered. This was reflected in an initial poll of reactions to the draft strategy which revealed 57.1% in favour of the merger, 4.8% against and with 38.1% abstaining. A further poll at the end of the meeting showed 71.4% in favour, 9.5% against, and 19% abstaining.

Composition & purpose of the meeting

1. The meeting included 35 UK representatives of scientific unions that are members of the International Council for Science (ICSU), UK learned societies which are members of ICSU unions, members of UK national academies (Royal Society, British Academy, Royal Academy of Engineering) and officers of ICSU and the International Social Science Council (ISSC).
2. The purpose of the meeting was:
 - to discuss the draft (31 March 2017) of the strategy for a new organisation that might arise from the merger of ICSU and ISSC (hereon the new body is termed “the Council”, whilst its governing body is referred to as its “council”);
 - to explore the extent of consensus about the creation, role and priorities of the new organisation;
 - to identify priority issues that should be embedded in further development of the strategy.
 - to report back to the Strategy Working Group (SWG), Transition Task Force (TTF) and Executive Board of ICSU and ISSC to inform their discussions.

Framing the discussion

3. The frame for the discussion was set by Dr Heide Hackmann, Executive Director of ICSU, who described the process of discussion to date, the timescale for further work prior to the joint ICSU/ISSC General Assembly in October that will make a final decision on whether or not to merge, and the essential arguments for the purpose and function of a new organization that have been created by the Strategy Working Group.
4. The contemporary context for the international scientific enterprise is:
 - the demand that it should contribute to the development of solutions to complex global problems through international and inter-disciplinary collaboration;
 - the growing challenges to the value and status of scientific enquiry and interpretation in a digital world and in the face of populist trends that require an authoritative voice that communicates broad-ranging scientific knowledge and demonstrates its social value;
 - the need to engage with broader societal stakeholders through “trans-disciplinary processes.
5. In engaging with this context, the mission of the new Council should be to act as the global voice of science in order to:

- champion scientific research as the most effective means of acquiring robust and reliable knowledge;
 - advocate the need for evidence-informed understanding and decision-making;
 - support international scientific research and scholarship that is relevant to current and emerging major issues of global concern;
 - promote the continued and equal development of scientific creativity and relevance in all parts of the world;
 - safeguard the freedom of scientific enquiry, movement and association;
 - protect and enhance scientific rigour and integrity.
6. To achieve this mission the Council will convene international scientific resources to catalyse, incubate and coordinate international action on issues of priority by:
- engaging with broader society, (targeting the UN, international policy fora, national governments, the private sector, civil society and the media);
 - stimulating and coordinating the responses to global issues by the international scientific community, including science policy makers and funders.
7. Essential attributes of the new organisation will be:
- core values that comprise excellence, professionalism, freedom and responsibility, inclusivity, diversity, innovation and sustainability;
 - an expansion of capacities and representation by including countries, unions and associations of key scientific or technological disciplines not yet represented by ICSU or ISSC, and developing complementary partnerships with other major international scientific organisations;
 - effective priority-setting through a focused, tractable, and persuasive agenda;
 - beneficial relationships with members by creating major opportunities to represent and strengthen their disciplinary and/or national interests and priorities;
 - attaining visibility through a powerful international presence with a strong brand;
 - having leadership and governance arrangements that combine legitimacy in the scientific community together with credibility to those it seeks to influence; and
 - supported by appropriate secretariat competencies and capacities.
8. The written responses of ICSU and ISSC members to the draft strategy were summarised and will be addressed in the next version of the strategy.

Discussion

9. The following is not a minute of the ensuing discussion, but a summary of major issues that arose from it. Discussion was opened by the Foreign Secretary of the Royal Society, who reported the Society's strong support for a more unified and strengthened global voice for advancing science as a global public good. This is a huge task for any single agency, and presents an opportunity for ICSU and others to work towards fulfilling this essential role. The Society has always recognized that science is an inherently international activity. Many of today's most pressing challenges are global ones. International science and research collaborations greatly enhance the knowledge and tools required to tackle them.
10. Strong support for the essential purpose of the proposed new organisation as presented in the draft strategy was expressed, though support was not universal and doubts were expressed about whether the activities that would carry forward the purpose were sufficiently focussed or could be credibly delivered. This was reflected in an initial poll of reactions to the strategy amongst those who voted, of 57.1% in favour of the merger, 4.8% against and with 38.1% abstaining (due to lack of information on the process of merging). A further poll at the end of the meeting showed 71.4% in favour, 9.5% against, and 19% abstaining.
11. Given that those present were mostly natural scientists, with more experience of ICSU than ISSC, discussion tended to entangle the issue of changes that ICSU alone needed if it was to survive as a

valuable body with the rationale for merger with ISSC. There then followed an exploration of what were felt to be key issues.

Why merge now?

12. There are two essential arguments for merger. The first, expressed clearly during the meeting, was the experience of many bodies, including national academies, when intervening on issues of public policy, particularly for major global challenges, that very few, if any, effective interventions were possible that did not include both natural and social scientists. A close collaboration between natural and social sciences, including the humanities, was perceived as vital if the current issues tackled by science are to develop viable solutions to global problems and to gain the societal trust in science through jointly produced communication. Moreover, if the policy discussion was framed by one group or the other in isolation, which then attempted to bring in the other, the initial framing was seen by the late-comer to lack essential perspectives. The lesson is clear, joint initial framing of major issues is an essential prerequisite, one that a merged Council would be well-placed to achieve.
13. It was suggested that an alternative to merger now, was for the two organisations to create a transitional framework to stimulate closer mutual working as a transition to later merger, a suggestion also made in written submissions from some members and re-iterated in a note from a member unable to attend the meeting. In the 1960s, the recognition of the reality of global environmental change and its human dimensions led to the creation of environmental science departments in universities, involving both natural and social sciences, and an optimism that closer collaboration and understanding of how their different perspectives might create a deeper understanding of issues of mutual concern and socially creative ways of responding to them. For many commentators this hope has not been realised, though programmes such as *Future Earth* are a current expression of this aspiration and of the potential for socially “transformative” solutions for global problems. It is as if two geographically separate communities have diverged genetically, particularly as many areas of the social sciences have embarked in an important process of self re-definition. If natural convergence of the capacity to work together has not happened over a half a century, can it be reasonably expected to happen now without some novel intervention? The creation of a merged Council could be the catalyst for such change, particularly if it is able to promote more effective dialogue between natural and social sciences, and the range of other parties whose support and knowledge will be vital for the Council’s success.
14. It was noted that a number of major organisations that have concerns for the vitality of international science have expressed enthusiasm for the merger. They include UNESCO, the Belmont Forum and the World Economic Forum. Their support reflects a desire for a stronger independent voice for science on the international stage, and a strengthening of the support for science-informed policies through greater synergy between the natural and social sciences.

The broader representative landscape

15. The international landscape of representation of the profession of scientific knowledge creation and application is clearly broader than the natural and social sciences, and is complex. It includes The World Academy of Sciences, a multi-disciplinary academy with individual membership that is primarily from the developing world, academies that are domain specific, particularly in engineering (e.g. the World Federation of Engineering Organisations) and medical sciences (e.g. the World Medical Association), bodies that represent national academies (such the Inter-Academy Partnership, limited to one member from each country, some of which are domain specific – e.g. the Royal Society, and some are broader – e.g. the Netherlands Academy which is comprehensive), bodies that represent domain-specific

academies (e.g. the International Council of Academies of Engineering and Technological Sciences); and regional groupings of academies

16. Under these circumstances, if a merged ICSU-ISSC Council is to speak as “the global voice for science”, it must inevitably build on relationships which ICSU and ISSC already hold, and create relationships with these other bodies that permit it to be sensitive to their perceptions and priorities, avoid overlap, and where appropriate to collaborate with them on specific issues. An important secretariat function would be to support collaboration and joint working.

Geographical inclusivity

17. The draft document rightly identifies the need for truly international collaboration if it is to address “problems of living sustainably and equitably on planet Earth.” It must include in its memberships countries not currently represented by ICSU or ISSC, many of which are categorised as “least developed”. A major issue for the Transition Task Force must therefore be to discuss how membership can be extended (adoption of ICSU’s criteria for new members to be sponsored by a number of existing members might be helpful). Operational planning of the new body must also consider how their involvement can be made effective, how the Council would respond to their priorities and “support the continued and equal development of scientific creativity and relevance in all parts of the world”.

“Open Science” & transformative engagement with civic society

18. An important question for the new Council is how to engage with the imperative for “open science”, in which science reaches out to engage with broader civic society (of which the “private sector” is an integral part). This raises the issue of whether individuals or public and private sector bodies could have a category of membership. Such a move would require considerations of criteria for such membership. Should it, for example, permit individuals and organisations that advocate creationism? The contribution of science based industries (scientific and financial), and their ‘in house’ knowledge and expertise, is necessary in the face of globalisation. Many multinationals support charitable foundations at arms length. The rich Diaspora from a number of developing countries already support the transfer of scientific knowledge etc to their countries of origin. Funding is vitally important and should not be underestimated.
19. In the past two decades, there has been an increasing realisation of the need to create public dialogue and engagement as two-way processes if effective and equitable public policies are to be developed and implemented. These approaches typically cross boundaries between different disciplines (physical, social, human, engineering, medical, life sciences) to achieve greater inter-disciplinarity; foster truly global collaboration embracing the full diversity of scientific voices from around the world; advance new research methods for the analysis of complex, multidisciplinary problems; and combine different types or subcultures of knowledge: specialized scientific, political/strategic, indigenous/local, community-based, individual, and holistic. Open knowledge systems facilitate solutions-oriented research, bringing academics and non-academics together as knowledge partners in networks of collaborative learning and problem-solving. The nature of the “audiences” for the activities of the new organization may differ between North/South or East/West countries.

The benefits to members

20. The membership of the new Council will include both national members that represent relatively broad multi-disciplinary interests and unions and associations that tend to represent single disciplines. For the

former, the Council could act to internationalise their work where it has general applicability. The latter are sources of fundamental understanding of phenomena tested against reality. Both are needed in the articulation of the integrative scientific understanding that is the crucial contribution of science to major global issues, which must draw on and demonstrate its roots in fundamental, largely disciplinary understanding. The prominence and profile given to these contributions are the fundamental benefits to members. The unions in particular may welcome a greater policy audience for their work. The new Council will need to develop processes that ensure connectivity with the work of its members. (An example was suggested in relation to the emerging issue of potential transformations of the human, through implantation, genetic manipulation and artificial intelligence. It is an issue that arguably should be raised internationally as a major human concern, with profound technical, ethical and societal dimensions, and biological, medical, chemical, informatics, social, psychological, economic and commercial components, in which the input of disciplinary specialists would be fundamental.)

21. It is important to distinguish between the roles of unions and associations and the roles proposed for the new Council. The role of the former are to further the development of their science and intervene in the public domain on issues that are directly relevant to their knowledge base. The role of the latter is to address major global issues, which are almost invariably multi-disciplinary and which require integration of evidence and concepts from many disciplines. All members should regard this as an important responsibility in contributing to the tapestry of scientific understanding needed to address major global issues, rather than seeing the new Council merely as a source of sectional self-interest.

Freedom and responsibility

22. There was strong support for the defence of freedoms and articulation of responsibilities of scientists to be a primary objective for the new Council. It was noted that the term “universality” was much misunderstood. Its use should be avoided if possible.

Focus

23. The success of the new Council will depend upon focusing on priorities in ways that both reflect its unique potential and that can be delivered by the resources at its disposal. Too diverse a portfolio of deliverables will undermine the capacity of the Council’s secretariat to deliver on its priorities and the Council’s potential for success. Dr Hackmann summarised six priority areas that had been identified during the meeting:

- Championing science
- Promoting international collaboration – primarily through international programmes
- Science for policy (as exemplified by current ICSU interventions with the UN)
- Policy for science (as exemplified by the recent work through Science International)
- Freedom & responsibilities of scientists
- Communicating science (science in the news)

It was concluded that this list was too long, and that the number of headline priorities should be small and focussed if they were to be effectively delivered. The following three were suggested as the critical headline objectives for the new Council:

Objective 1: *To articulate in the public domain the scientific perspective and current understanding on issues that are of major contemporary international concern; and to introduce into that domain issues that arise from scientific discovery that the Council believes require international public awareness.*

Objective 2: *To stimulate and support research and collaboration that enables the scientific community to address the issues in 1) and adapt to new demands and opportunities.*

Objective 3: *To defend the freedom to express scientific ideas without restraint and to advocate responsible ethical standards in doing so.*

24. Many of the issues identified elsewhere as priorities, such as capacity building, trans-disciplinary processes or communicating science, should not be regarded as primary objectives, but cross-cutting processes to be used in support of the primary objectives, and as vital parts of the toolbox available to the council and secretariat in managing its portfolio and delivering its primary objectives. A focussed set of objectives will simplify management of the organisation and permit the Council's leadership to determine how priorities are targeted and the activities that any one time are best suited to delivering its mission. The greater the number of headline priorities that are expected to be delivered, the greater the difficulty of managing them.
25. It is also important to recognise the potential for work with other bodies in support of the Council's mission. For example, in the important area of open data and open science, the independently-funded cross disciplinary bodies, ICSU-CODATA and ICSU-WDS, play leading roles on behalf of ICSU; collaboration between ICSU, ISSC, IAP and TWAS, through the medium of Science International, has produced the Accord on Open Data (now endorsed by >120 bodies worldwide); and CODATA is engaged in capacity building in data science for an African Open Data Platform.
26. The possibility that the Council could have a "rapid-reaction" role in response to issues as they arise was suggested, though there was scepticism that this could be achieved. Maintaining a wide ranging, rigorous, rapid-reaction capacity would be resource intensive and would be associated with perennial reputational risk as such public interventions are difficult to control. This could however be achieved for particular issues that were currently being dealt with in depth by the Council.
27. The core values of ICSU (para 7, 1st bullet point) were given strong support as essential attributes in designing and underpinning the approach of the Council and its activities. A particular priority was given to the issue of freedom and responsibility, of ensuring that there is a truly global contribution to objective 1, and capacity building in relation to both 1 and 2.

Leadership

28. If the Council is to have legitimacy and credibility as the "global voice of science", and if it is to deliver on the objectives in para 23, its leadership (senior officers and council members) will need to be of the highest scientific calibre, with extensive experience and good judgement. Ideally, it should have a President with public name recognition.
29. An appointments process needs to be agreed that is able to achieve this end. The loaded term "guided democracy" was suggested as a means of achieving this. One suggested process involved the creation of a nominating committee, able to identify an appropriate slate from suggestions made by individual members that could then be presented to all members for them to vote on.
30. Designing the relationship with members needs particular care. Is decision making to be through 'parliamentary democracy' whereby councillors are elected as above by members, and then use their judgement to develop and present strategy, and conduct oversight on its delivery? Or is it to be direct democracy, whereby the members have a more direct role in creation and day-to-day oversight? The latter would be highly unwieldy. Who signs off reports and other interventions? The council or the members? It is vital that decision makers are not seen to have entrenched views.

31. The terms of officers, council members and committee chairs was discussed. It was suggested that 4-year terms would be appropriate, with the possibility of a second term. Or would the latter create too sluggish a turnover of leadership?
32. The possibility of creating a group of “patrons” was suggested. This would be a group of high level, respected, uncontentious public figures, able and willing to advise, make contacts for and speak on behalf of the Council on selected issues.

Communication

33. If the Council is to be successful in delivering the objectives in para 23, it will be vital that it has a much enhanced and highly professional communications capacity. This will be an essential pre-requisite in creating the visibility and profile required to ensure that it has the necessary impact on those it wishes to influence, both on the public international stage and amongst scientists. Essential to effective communication are: good judgement about how and when to communicate a message, the target for the communication that is most likely to yield the desired impact, and expressing communication in ways that are sensitive and comprehensible to its many recipients. External communication on major, possibly contentious matters, may require expert legal, political and media advice. A careful analysis of the attributes needed for an effective communications capacity that will serve the aims of the new Council should be undertaken at an early stage of planning.
34. The Council will also need to improve communication with members and enhance its visibility and outreach to the international scientific community if it is legitimately to claim to be “the global voice of science.”

Build-up to the launch

35. If the decision to proceed with a merger is made in October 2017, it is vital that prior thought has been given to the build-up to a launch. If the new Council is to have the impact suggested in this report, attract the support of scientists, the collaboration of other bodies and develop high visibility, it would be best if it could be launched with a bang rather than a whimper, without excessive delay but with a sense of momentum.
36. The timescale is important. We presume the following:
 - October 2017 – announcement of the decision to merge through a strong, well-crafted public statement of vision and mission. Election process begins (hopefully previously determined by the TTF).
 - Early 2018 – announcement of the new leadership and council? With a further strong public statement.

However, the understanding is that the existing leadership will continue to a first GA of the new body in autumn 2018. If the new strategy is to be in the hands of the new leadership, then either the new council should not be announced till autumn 2018, or its should run as a shadow council with the remit of developing the strategy and a launch plan, whilst the old leadership runs day-to-day affairs, or the old leadership should remit office at a date earlier than anticipated. Otherwise, an excessively long and latent period of inaction will ensue.

37. Whilst the announcement of plans for the new organisation could be part of the build up to a launch, a promissory note is a much weaker basis for launch than a strong intervention in the public domain. One way of achieving this without excessive delay, might be to scan the current activities of academies, and

ask whether there are projects/statements/initiatives that have global implications and could be taken up and internationalised by the new body. In this way strong, substantive intervention by the new body might be achievable by early 2019. An alternative might be to launch with a conference, provided that major impacts could be achieved through novel scientific results with important public implications, though the relatively short timescale for planning might prohibit this.

Other issues

38. A number of other significant issues were also raised, which are integral to many of the priorities expressed above, but which deserve further consideration:
- Working in/with Africa and developing countries should be a priority, with possible links to the national development agendas (e.g. ODA). We should look to our colleagues in the region for guidance on priorities.
 - ISSC has had significant success in external fundraising, and has strong regional bodies; this should be explored by the new Council.
 - The international funding landscape has changed, with funders now collaborating directly with each other to define, and fund, mutual interests. The new Council should be in dialogue with these bodies about priorities and funding.
 - The Council needs to play a more active role in involving early career scientists with issues of science policy. Young academies could be useful collaborators. Research training workshops might be valuable in encouraging new forms of interactive science amongst the rising generation of scholars.
 - Some members suggested annual meetings of the new Council.
 - Many unions have strong connections with the private sector, facilitating a route through which the Council might engage effectively with the private sector.
 - Careful consideration should be given to alternative modes of operation in relation to an issue. Facilitation, convening and active delivery have different resource implications, and the Council should be astute in choosing the optimal route.
 - The Council will need to work effectively with national members. Where there several national academies representing different disciplinary domains, they should be encouraged to collaborate with the national member in achieving the best inter- or trans-disciplinary perspectives in their relations with the Council.
 - A regular, up-to-the-minute, Newsletter, widely circulated, especially the media/press/broadcasters worldwide/twitter/opinion formers/funders etc could be very important
 - Comments by chief scientists to government would be helpful input during the planning stage.

Next steps

The Society has requested additional information on the practical implications of the merger (in relation to membership, obligations, subscriptions and funding). A Transition Task Force (TTF) will provide this information, together with a revised strategy document drafted by a separate Strategy Working Group (SWG) at the end of July 2017. These documents will be reviewed by members ahead of the ICSU General Assembly in Taipei, October 2017, at which members (the Foreign Secretary on behalf of the Royal Society) will be asked to vote on the proposed merger.