A new department, a new minister – and a new select committee

Science and technology is now part of the newly created government Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, with Lord Mandelson in overall charge. What will this mean for UK science?

The new Department arises from the merger of the Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills with the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform. The Science Minister, Lord Drayson, retains his role as science minister in the cabinet reshuffle that accompanied the formation of the overarching new ministry.

The reorganization continues the government approach of grouping science with business and innovation, as well as with universities and skills training. But the new bigger ministry has led to some cause for concern about the particular needs of science.

A special report from the House of Commons Innovation, Universities, Science & Skills Committee, chaired by Phil Willis, draws attention to the problem of scrutiny of science across government, in one of its final reports (The future of science scrutiny following the merger of DIUS and BERR; Fourth Special Report of Session 2008–09). Select committees reflect the wider ministerial structure, and so this committee will disband and be replaced by one with a wider remit.

That committee itself supplanted the Science and Technology Select Committee, and concerns about the workload proved well-founded. The 10 June report states: “It has proved difficult to balance the scrutiny of the expenditure, administration and policy of the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills with the demands of examining the use of science across government. Looking forward, attempting to do this same balancing act with an even larger department which also covers business, enterprise and regulation will prove impossible for the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee. ... We believe that in the long term a separate Science and Technology Committee is the only way to guarantee a permanent focus on science across Government within the select committee system.”

This was the view widely endorsed by the UK science community, including the RAS, and it has now been announced that a Science and Technology Select Committee will be re-established in the autumn. RAS President Prof. Andy Fabian welcomed the move. “Science and technology, including astronomy and geophysics, are a key part of our society and will play a crucial role in future economic growth. With the re-establishment of the Committee, MPs will once again be able to give the scrutiny of science the attention it deserves.”

http://www.dius.gov.uk

Highs and lows?

Tough financial times worldwide mean tough times for science funding, too. There are going to be difficult decisions for governments and science administrators over the next few years, as national debt bites. Yet governments also continue to acknowledge that science and technology have a pivotal role to play in national prosperity and international prestige. And this role is not limited to those science and technical careers that will boom in the future – many elements of scientific training are transferable skills, especially if early-career training fosters the sort of skills that help people move their careers into new areas. But sciences such as astronomy also play a valuable role in attracting people to science in the first place – a fact recognized in the activities worldwide for International Year of Astronomy 2009. Fascination with the stars, wondering how sunlight makes its way to Earth, and why planets have magnetic fields are all the sorts of questions that draw young people into science, and keep them there through rigorous examinations. They also form the sorts of minds that can tackle new areas of research such as geoengineering, or apply their skills to burgeoning fields such as genetic research.

And we know that people follow interesting careers that do not necessarily stay within the disciplines that they started out in – but we don’t always shout loudly enough about this. Some dedicated – you might say narrow-minded – researchers see those who choose careers out of the subject as objects of pity, and forget about them. But we should be celebrating this great success, that we can send trained, capable, enthusiastic people into a whole wide range of new fields. We are producing the analysts, the communicators, the collaborators, that everyone tells us the country needs, and we should be very proud of ourselves as a group.

Review of UK space industry

An expert group has been charged by the UK government to assess future challenges and opportunities for the UK space industries, and to formulate a 20-year strategy for British leadership in space.

Science Minister Lord Drayson announced the review on 25 June, saying: “Britain is a global leader in space. This initiative will help to keep us there.” The Innovation Growth Team for Space will be chaired by Andy Green (CEO of Logica) and will seek views from across the existing strong UK space industries, as well as in sectors that may become involved, such as entertainment, navigation and climate change.

The Space IGT is a combined government and industry team that hopes to use the best industrial leadership to identify the future innovation, technology and investment priorities for the sector and other enablers of growth, in line with the government’s New Industry, New Jobs strategy. It will set out the challenges and opportunities that govern future value creation, competitiveness and growth in the space sector.

The Space IGT should announce preliminary findings at the end of the year with the full report expected in early 2010. The team seeks comments from all interested parties.

http://www.intellectuk.org/content/view/5199/598

A new constellation for IYA2009

A competition for schoolchildren to think up a new constellation produced a mouse – a wee sleakit beastie – as the winning entry. The Constellation Project for IYA2009 linked eight schools across Scotland to astronomical sites such as observatories, and then on to stars whose distance away in light-years corresponded to the age of the site. Schools on Orkney, for example, chose their star based on the age of Maes Howe, the nearby Neolithic monument. They chose the double cluster in Perseus, correspondingly 5000 light-years away, so that the light we now see left the cluster when Maes Howe was built. More than 200 children at the eight schools designed a constellation using the eight stars. Laura, a year 7 pupil at Dalmeny Primary School in Edinburgh, won first prize for her “Wee Sleakit Beastie” (above), and seems determined to carry on with this interest: “Science is fun and extremely fascinating. There is so much to learn. Astronomy is my main interest now and I will stick with it for life I hope.” Second prize went to “Mermida” (by Laura, Lauder Primary School). Equal third prizes went to “Lost in the Jungle” (Abdur, Glendale Primary School) and “Seaaurora, the Whisperer of Lights” (Ruby, Broadford Primary School). Winners were presented with their awards by Liz Lochead, the Scottish Poet Laureate, in a ceremony in the planetarium at Glasgow Science Centre on 30 June.