

CATAPULT CENTRES AND THE INTERACTIONS WITH THE RESEARCH BASE - A NOTE FROM THE PRAXISUNICO CHAIR

This note is a summary of a recent meeting. It represents a personal summary of the event and should not be taken as an official record, which will be produced separately.

A meeting was held in Swindon bringing together the Funding Councils, RCUK and the TSB with a group of PraxisUnico members. The aim of the meeting was to explore mechanisms and approaches to enhance the interaction between the new Catapult centres and the research base. The meeting was held at the request of a working group led by the TSB, in which Alison Campbell is involved as a Board member of PraxisUnico.

The first Catapult centres have been selected and it is abundantly clear that they will not be 'one size fits all' solution. The Advanced Manufacturing area bringing together seven existing activities, all with well established links with industry compared to the cell therapy area with an industrial base in its infancy and a need to animate new demands.

The meeting started with the animation of the goal that Catapults are aimed at addressing the deficit between the achievements of the research base and the articulation of these into benefits for UK plc. The steps taken in recent years by the research base were acknowledged, but then I don't think anyone can disagree that the UK still needs to go further in re-shaping the UK economy to be more technology and research aware.

The discussion ranged over four hours with active contributions from all present. It is impossible to do justice to the contributions of all participants and only a few themes are picked up in this briefing note.

The key theme which emerged was communication, communication, communication. It is essential that the Catapult centres are understood both individually and collectively. Clear and consistent communications need to come from TSB, RCUK and BIS. Myths need to be dispelled quickly, otherwise an entire set of 'urban legends' will emerge.

It has been accepted with cross Party support that Catapults are not a short term investment, they are expected to have a funding framework with a sustained third of funding from the public purse, a third from collaborative research and a third from contract work with industry. It was noted that this model is welcome over the narrow, oft cited, view that such enterprises should be self sustainable after three years. It was recognised that there was still a significant challenge given that many collaborative projects may need to be underpinned by the one third public support. (e.g. EU projects will not be 100% funded). It was suggested a move to a four way split ensuring continued underpinning might be essential to avoid a move to short termism. Avoiding short term

decisions dominating was seen as critical to success, and to ensuring a fruitful relationship with the research base.

A further factor was the need to ensure focus on technology readiness levels 4, 5 and 6. Too often public interventions in the funding gap have migrated either to lower or higher TRLs. Yet the market failure is at 4, 5 and 6 and Catapults need to focus there. Such a focus would ensure value added with the research base which tend to focus on TRL 1-3.

TSB were at pains to point out that the focus of the Catapult Centres do not imply that these are the only important areas for national strategic focus. But they are the areas of strategic focus where Catapult centres are deemed to be the effective answer.

Catapult activity will be really valuable if they can truly deliver an understanding of what is required in the middle TR levels. They need to both look to demand, not simply present demand but future demand, and to the research base. Responding only to the existing UK industrial base will reinforce the past and Catapults need to invent the future. By providing and sharing a real understanding of emerging technologies and markets they will enhance both the work of industry and the research base. In some senses Catapults were seen to be a technology venturing model and their resources should be thought of as public investment in re-shaping innovation for the economy. Any view that they are a grant-giving agency must be dispelled.

It was recognised that each Catapult will develop differently but it was recommended that each must be clear on what it will do and what it will not do. They need to understand and articulate their business models in order to enable the contracting and business framework to flow from those decisions. Simplifying contractual mechanisms was encouraged.

Metrics were inevitably discussed, and concern expressed about the metric chosen driving behaviour. Many suggestions were put forward and it is to be hoped that the discussion on metrics is seen outside of any short term political pressures. One possible metric was to ensure projects were of scale and that they clearly tackled the right TRL levels.

Concerns were expressed about potential tensions with the research base. Catapult activity must be seen to be increasing the overall level of R and D activity in the industrial community rather than diverting existing collaboration. For to do so would simply mean that Catapults are 'fishing in the same pond' with basic scientists, which could become divisive.

In conclusion everyone recognised that this was a big policy change and it was in the interests of all that this new development succeeds. In order to succeed it needed to undertake activity of a scale and type that was not presently taking place. There were a series of very helpful suggestions on actions which would aid success and these will all be considered by the working group. PraxisUnico would like to thank all participants who took part.

DWR March 2012