



# CORPORATE STAKEHOLDER RESEARCH

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY  
OCTOBER 2016

# CONTEXT

The Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC) commissioned ComRes to undertake research to gauge stakeholder perceptions of the organisation and measure any change in attitudes since 2014, when an initial wave of benchmarking research was conducted. This report explores the findings from the 2016 research and draws out how BBSRC has progressed in the past two years. The 2016 research consisted of ComRes conducting 31 qualitative interviews between the 11<sup>th</sup> April and 30<sup>th</sup> June 2016, and an online survey of 507 stakeholders administered by BBSRC between 9<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> June 2016, the findings from which ComRes independently analysed.

In terms of the quantitative phase, the majority of surveys were completed by stakeholders from academia, to a greater extent than in 2014, where there was a more even split between participants from academia and industry. It is worth noting that due to the balance of responses, we have included breakdowns of the results for all questions by stakeholder audience in the main body of the report. This is in order to illustrate whether the views of academics differ from those of other groups significantly, and whether the change in the composition of completed responses is the primary reason for any changes in overall perceptions between waves.

The past two years have seen several significant developments with potentially wide-reaching implications across the UK's research landscape, including Brexit and the Government's intention to create UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). In addition, this period has seen the departure of Professor Jackie Hunter, BBSRC's Chief Executive and the subsequent appointment of Professor Melanie Welham as interim Chief Executive.

## AWARENESS AND UNDERSTANDING OF BBSRC

Reported levels of awareness of and familiarity with BBSRC are high among stakeholders with 88% saying they know either a great deal or a fair amount about BBSRC, a finding consistent with 2014 (84%). Stakeholders working in academia are particularly likely to be familiar (94% saying they know a great deal or a fair amount about BBSRC), followed by Government / policy (85%), Industry (78%) and Civil Society Organisation (74%) stakeholders. Positively the majority of stakeholders also feel that BBSRC keeps them well informed (74%), as was also the case in 2014 (73%).

Stakeholders are most likely to associate BBSRC with research grants, echoing findings from the previous wave. However, they have become more likely to associate knowledge exchange and innovation with BBSRC since 2014, suggesting communications regarding BBSRC's work in these areas have cut through.

## WORKING RELATIONSHIPS

Stakeholders tend to report productive working relationships and high quality interactions with BBSRC. Around two thirds (63%) state that they find working with BBSRC to be easy, an increase of eight percentage points since 2014 (55%). Very few (7%) say they have a difficult working relationship. Similarly, four in five (79%) stakeholders report that they have positive interactions with BBSRC, a proportion in line with the 2014 survey. While these are positive findings, there is significant variation by stakeholder group. For example, while Industry stakeholders seem to have become more satisfied with working relationships, the reverse trend is evident among Government / Policy stakeholders. Tailoring the method and frequency of contact with stakeholders to suit their specific needs is therefore essential.

A majority of stakeholders (66%) report that BBSRC adds value to their organisation, though crucially a similar proportion indicate that the organisation could add more (67%). This suggests that stakeholders have an appreciation of the value added by BBSRC, and a desire to work more closely with the organisation. Qualitative insight highlights that the expertise of BBSRC employees is one of the key

means through which the organisations adds value. Additionally, BBSRC is perceived as having a strong brand which adds legitimacy and credibility to partner organisations, and to provide valuable assistance through bringing together stakeholders with shared interests from different sectors (for instance from industry and academia). Across all stakeholder groups there is a desire for closer working relationships, which presents both a challenge and an opportunity for BBSRC. The challenge is understanding how to engage meaningfully and in sufficient depth to meet stakeholder expectations, while the opportunity is developing diverse relationships and building advocacy for UK bioscience and BBSRC.

## PERFORMANCE AND IMPACT

Spontaneous perceptions of BBSRC stated during qualitative interviews indicate that the organisation is most commonly perceived as ‘innovative’, ‘helpful’ and ‘open’. In the quantitative survey, from a list of words tested, ‘credible’ (48%) is the term which stakeholders are most likely to associate with BBSRC. However, one in four also associate BBSRC with being ‘bureaucratic’, suggesting this is an area in which the organisation may be able to improve (24%), though this is down slightly from 30% in 2014.

The majority (74%) of BBSRC stakeholders say they would speak highly of the organisation. Advocacy is highest among Government / policy (81%), Academic (76%) and Industry (71%) stakeholders, but only 51% of Civil Society Organisation stakeholders report likewise.

Qualitative interviews uncover the following areas to be key drivers of advocacy:

- The helpful nature and professionalism of BBSRC staff;
- BBSRC’s focus on innovation;
- BBSRC’s consultative approach; and
- BBSRC’s focus on the impact agenda and the dissemination of this to stakeholders.

Stakeholders are broadly positive regarding BBSRC’s contribution to social and economic impact. There has been a marked increase in the proportion of stakeholders rating BBSRC’s contribution to social impact favourably (31%, rate it as between 7–10 out of 10, up from 19% in 2014, where 10 is excellent and 1 is very poor). Ratings of BBSRC’s contribution to economic impact has also increased by 6 percentage points (50%, up from 44% in 2014). The qualitative interviews illustrate that stakeholders attribute this to BBSRC making more sustained efforts to promote the impact of the research it funds externally, suggesting this is something that BBSRC should continue to emphasise in communications with stakeholders.

## VISION AND STRATEGIC DIRECTION

Stakeholders are generally familiar with the mission and vision of BBSRC. In the quantitative survey, three in five indicate familiarity (61% rate themselves as 7 – 10 out of 10, where 10 is very familiar and 1 is very unfamiliar, an increase of six percentage points since 2014). Academics are the most likely of all stakeholder groups to report familiarity with BBSRC’s mission and values (74%). On the other hand, only three in ten (28%) stakeholders from the civil society group say the same, highlighting an opportunity to engage more broadly with this audience.

During in–depth discussions, stakeholders tended to be broadly familiar with BBSRC’s mission but often lacked a detailed knowledge or understanding of the specifics of it. A few stakeholders are able to describe BBSRC’s mission and values in detail, usually because they have attended an event or received communications recently outlining this. Further to this, while more than half (57%) of stakeholders feel that BBSRC achieves its vision, more than four in five (83%) feel there is scope for BBSRC to work more closely with them in achieving it. As such, the research suggests that there is desire among stakeholders to work more closely with BBSRC to deliver its strategic goals.

BBSRC's contribution towards Bioscience and the bioeconomy is universally viewed as extremely important. As in 2014, 88% of stakeholders agree that the UK has a world leading position in bioscience, and 79% of stakeholders think that the UK's international position is due to BBSRC. Within this, 18% feel this is *a great deal* down to BBSRC, with 61% believing the UK's position in bioscience is due to the BBSRC to *a fair amount*. Qualitative insight supports this – overall, there is a consensus among stakeholders that BBSRC is a good representative of UK bioscience, with many citing its credibility internationally as especially important. However, several feel that BBSRC could be more visible.

A new area explored in the 2016 research was that of the 'bioeconomy', a concept that BBSRC has built into its narrative over the past two years to help illustrate the economic and social impact of UK bioscience. The quantitative survey illustrates that familiarity with the concept of the bioeconomy is high (78% report that they are familiar), particularly among Government / policy stakeholders (91%). However, during qualitative interviews it emerges that while many stakeholders are convinced of the relevance of the bioeconomy to economic growth and are aware of BBSRC's contribution to it, the term itself is criticised by several respondents who view it as a buzzword lacking in true meaning.

## QUANTITATIVE METRICS WITH SIGNIFICANT CHANGE

This year's quantitative survey was completed by a total of 507 respondents, compared to 383 in 2014. As a result, changes of less than seven percentage points should be treated as an indicative trend, rather than a definitive change in attitude. Below, we have indicated the occasions in which metrics have shifted by more than this, representing a significant change in stakeholder perceptions:

- Ease of working relationship with BBSRC: More than three in five (63%) stakeholders report that working with BBSRC is easy, an increase of seven percentage points since 2014.
- BBSRC adding value: Two thirds (66%) of respondents rate BBSRC's value add as 7–10 out of 10, an increase of seven percentage points since 2014. In addition, only 20% feel BBSRC could not add any more value, a decrease of nine percentage points since 2014.
- Contribution to economic and social impact: Half (50%) of stakeholders rate BBSRC's contribution to economic impact as between 7 – 10 out of 10, a rise of eight percentage points since 2014. One in three (31%) rate BBSRC's contribution to social impact as between 7 – 10 out of 10, a rise of ten percentage points since 2014.
- Achievement of its vision: 57% of stakeholders rate BBSRC's achievement of its vision as between 7 – 10 out of 10, an increase of twelve percentage points since 2014.
- The proportion of stakeholders associating BBSRC with science policy has decreased from 52% in 2014 to 43% in 2016.

## FUTURE PRIORITIES

When asked to reflect on future priorities for BBSRC, several topics emerged consistently:

- Securing a level of funding that will enable BBSRC to fund a wide range of research – which is likely to be challenging in the current economic climate, particularly given the breadth of BBSRC's remit;
- Continuing to demonstrate the tangible impacts of BBSRC funded work;
- Ensuring a smooth transition to new leadership;
- Championing fundamental research and bioscience, and making sure the UK is as competitive as possible in bioscience and scientific research; and
- Engaging the public in science.

Overarching this, the transition to UKRI<sup>1</sup> was mentioned by most stakeholders as a real challenge for BBSRC and bioscience in the UK more broadly. Stakeholders feel it is important that BBSRC's expertise is retained and that it maintains sufficient autonomy to be able to maintain and build upon the UK's international position in bioscience.

## EMERGING THEMES

Reflecting on the main findings from this report, a number of consistent themes emerged during the research that may be beneficial for BBSRC to consider to further develop the strong relationships it has with stakeholders and ensure they are fully aware of the breadth and impact of BBSRC's work:

- Tailoring the method and frequency of contact with stakeholders to deepen relationships;
- Continuing to emphasise the impact of bioscience and BBSRC's role;
- Defining and communicating the purpose of the bioeconomy;
- Proactively engaging with stakeholders throughout the transition to UKRI; and

Exploring Government / Policy and Civil Society landscape in the context of BBSRC's remit to maximise engagement opportunities

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/john-kingman-to-lead-creation-of-new-6-billion-research-and-innovation-body>

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