

# *Government and research policy in the UK: an introduction*

**A guide for researchers**

This guide has been produced by the Research Information Network with the aim to clarify those structures responsible for research and higher education policy within Government, and sets out how these bodies influence and shape the management and use of science and engineering by Government.

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## **About the Research Information Network**

The Research Information Network has been established by the Higher Education Funding Councils, the Research Councils, and the UK national libraries. We investigate how efficient and effective the information services provided for the UK research community are, how they are changing, and how they might be improved for the future. We help to ensure that researchers in the UK benefit from world-leading information services, so that they can sustain their position as among the most successful and productive researchers in the world. All our publications are available on our website at [www.rin.ac.uk](http://www.rin.ac.uk)

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# 1. Introduction

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Government in the UK involves a complex array of bodies with responsibilities for developing and implementing policies. This applies as much to policies and funding for research and the research environment as to other areas in which Government is a key player.

This guide aims to describe the nature, roles and responsibilities of the different Government bodies involved in research policy and funding, and the relationships between them. The picture has become more complicated over the past decade, mainly as a result of the processes of devolution to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland of responsibilities that were once the sole preserve of the UK Government. We hope that this guide will help researchers and others to understand how policy is made and implemented in key areas such as research infrastructure, career development for researchers, and, of course, funding. Such an understanding may be particularly valuable at a time when funding for research is likely to come under increasing pressure.

## 2. The structure of Government in the UK

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### UK Parliament and Government

The key elements of Government in the UK start with Parliament – made up of the House of Commons and the House of Lords – and the central UK Government, headed by the Prime Minister and the Cabinet. The Government derives its authority to govern by commanding a majority in the House of Commons, and is responsible for the business of the UK state, acting within the powers and resources granted by Parliament. The Cabinet is made up of senior Ministers and is the supreme decision-making body in Government. There is a Cabinet Sub-Committee on Science and Innovation, although it is not yet known whether it will continue to exist following the formation of the new Government in May 2010.

### Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

The UK Parliament and Government have devolved certain powers and responsibilities to the Scottish Parliament and the Assemblies in Wales and Northern Ireland; and to their Governments and Executives. These responsibilities include higher education and the funding of universities; and while responsibility for the Research Councils rests with the UK Government, the devolved Governments have important responsibilities for the funding of research, particularly in universities.

### Government Departments and cross-departmental units

The key executive bodies in the UK Government are Departments (Directorates in Scotland), most of which are headed by a Cabinet Minister – usually titled Secretary of State – who is supported by junior Ministers, usually titled Ministers of State or Parliamentary Under Secretaries of State. Departments are funded by Parliament and staffed by civil servants headed by a Permanent Secretary. The main roles of Departments are to advise Ministers and to implement the policies determined by them. Some units within Government operate across Departments, in order to ensure that policy and practice are joined up and not compartmentalised. One such unit is the Government Office for Science, whose role is set out in Section 3.

### Non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs)

NDPBs come in a number of forms. They carry out administrative, executive, advisory or regulatory functions on behalf of Government, but are not an integral part of a Government Department and carry out their work at arm's length from Ministers. They are normally established by Act of Parliament or Royal Charter, and have a board with members appointed by Ministers, who are ultimately responsible to Parliament for the activities of NDPBs sponsored by their Department. NDPBs employ their own staff (who are not civil servants) and manage their own budgets. For the purposes of this leaflet, NDPBs may be divided into two main groups: executive and advisory.

### 3. Science across the UK Government

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**The Minister of State for Universities and Science** has overall responsibility for policy on higher education in England, and for research across the UK. Although not a Cabinet Minister, he attends Cabinet and chairs its Sub-Committee on Science and Innovation.

**The Government Chief Scientific Adviser (GCSA)** is the personal adviser to the Prime Minister and the Cabinet on science and technology-related activities and policies; and head of the Government Office for Science (GO-Science). The GCSA provides advice to all Departments, and chairs the committee of Scientific Advisers who have been appointed in other Departments across Government.

**GO-Science, the Government Office for Science**, has been established to support the GCSA in his work, and to ensure that Government policy and decision-making is informed by reliable scientific evidence and long-term thinking. Its report on Science and Engineering in Government, published in 2009, is a statement of its approach to the management and use of science and engineering within Government. It has two principal units:

- **Science in Government (SIG)**, which is responsible for the frameworks for management and use of science and engineering in Government, and supports the network of Chief Scientific Advisers. It also undertakes science and engineering reviews of Departments, and provides the secretariat for the Council for Science and Technology (see below); and
- **Foresight**, which undertakes projects applying science and futures techniques to long-term challenges and opportunities. The Horizon Scanning Centre, housed within Foresight, undertakes and maintains cross-cutting scans, as well as supporting Departments in specific projects and in developing their own horizon scanning capacities.

**The International Science and Innovation Unit (ISIU)** supports GO-Science and the GCSA to ensure that UK researchers, business and Government gain as much benefit as possible from international partnerships and programmes, and are partners of choice for overseas counterparts. It also supports the GCSA in his role as chair of the Global Science and Innovation Forum (GSIF). Finally, along with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, BIS funds the Science and Innovation Network, based at UK Embassies and Consulates around the world.

**The Council for Science and Technology (CST)** is an independent advisory body which advises the Prime Minister and the First Ministers of the Devolved Governments on strategic issues that cut across the responsibilities of individual Government Departments. It is chaired by the GCSA and made up of members from academia, business and the voluntary sector. It takes a long-term approach and organises its work around five broad themes: research; science and society; education; science and Government; and technology innovation.



## 4. UK Government Departments with responsibility for research policy and funding

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The Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) is the primary Department responsible for science and research policy and funding. But many other Departments have responsibilities for research policy and funding, including the Departments of Health; Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; Transport; International Development; the Home Office; and the Ministry of Defence. Many of them have substantial research budgets, and together they currently spend over £1.4bn a year on research, excluding defence. All major Government Departments, with the exception of the Treasury, have a Chief Scientific Adviser, whose role is to ensure that strategy, and the development and implementation of policy, are properly informed by relevant and high-quality advice and expertise. Some Departments have also established Science Advisory Councils or Committees to provide independent overviews of the management and use of science either across the whole Department's areas of responsibility, or on specific issues.



## 5. The Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS)

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BIS is the Department that has overall responsibility for research and the health of the research base across the UK, as well as for higher education in England. One of its core objectives is to promote world-class research in the UK, with a research base responsive to users and the economy, with sustainable and financially strong universities and public laboratories and a strong supply of scientists, engineers and technologists.

Like other Government Departments, BIS is headed by a Secretary of State, but matters relating to universities and science are the responsibility of a Minister of State, who also attends Cabinet. The Department's science and engineering activity is overseen by the BIS Chief Scientific Adviser.

### BIS and science

The key BIS responsibilities for science across the UK include a number of different areas, with the Director General for Science and Research (DGSR) the key senior official:

- science and society, covering its work to improve science communications, boost the skills base and build public confidence in science, delivered primarily through the Science and Society Secretariat;
- science funding, covering its allocation of the Science Budget into research via the seven Research Councils as well as the funding provided through the Technology Strategy Board and the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA);
- knowledge transfer, covering its work to promote transferring good ideas, research results and skills between universities, other research organisations, business and the wider community to enable innovative new products and services to be developed;
- science and innovation analysis, providing professional advice and evaluation to develop the evidence base underpinning science, technology and innovation policy.

### BIS and universities

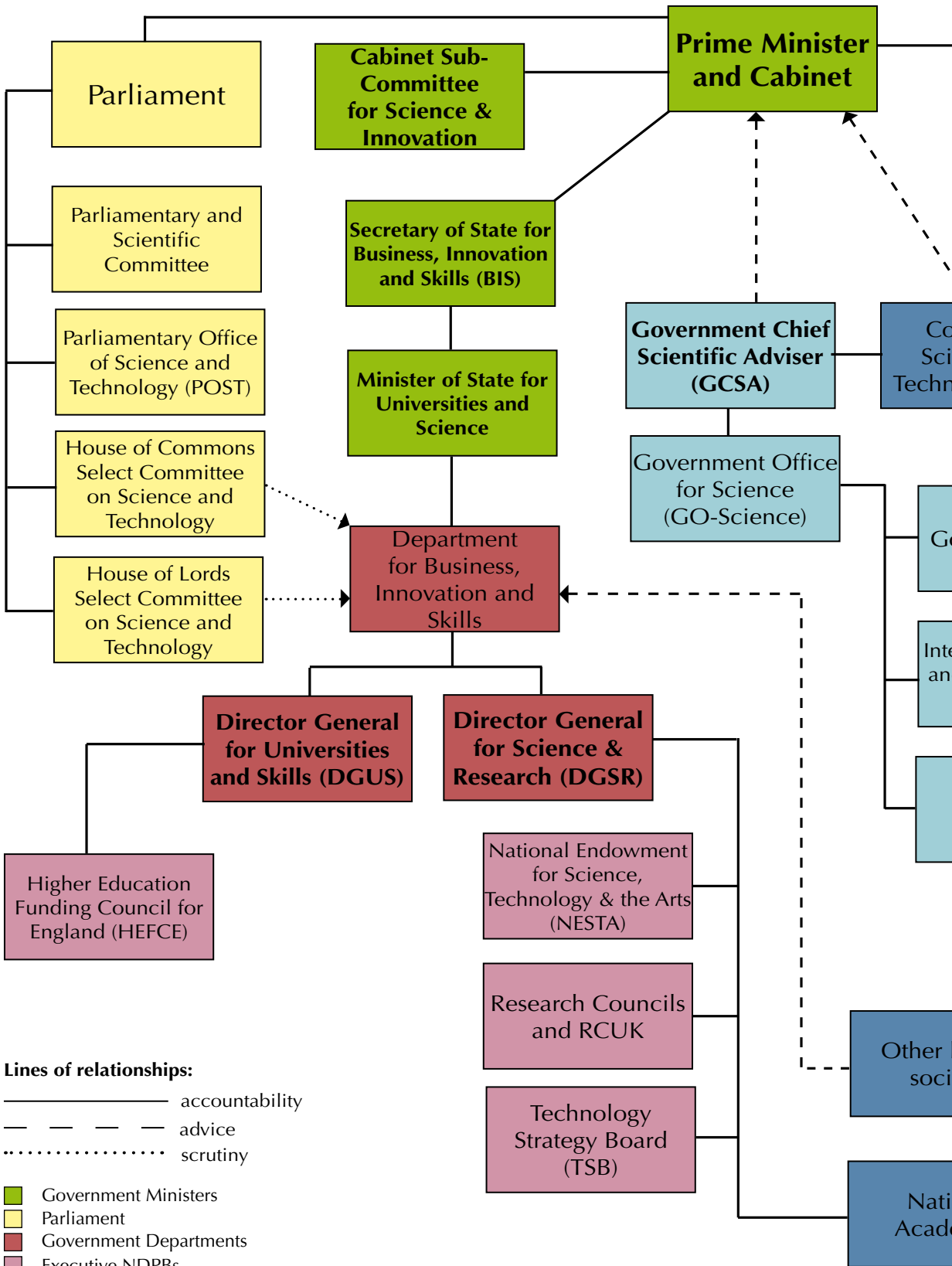
BIS is responsible for policy and the funding of higher education in England only. The Director General for Universities and Skills is the senior responsible official. Higher education policy and funding in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales are covered by their respective governments and executives.



## BIS and innovation

Many of the BIS responsibilities for innovation are closely related to research and science policy, including:

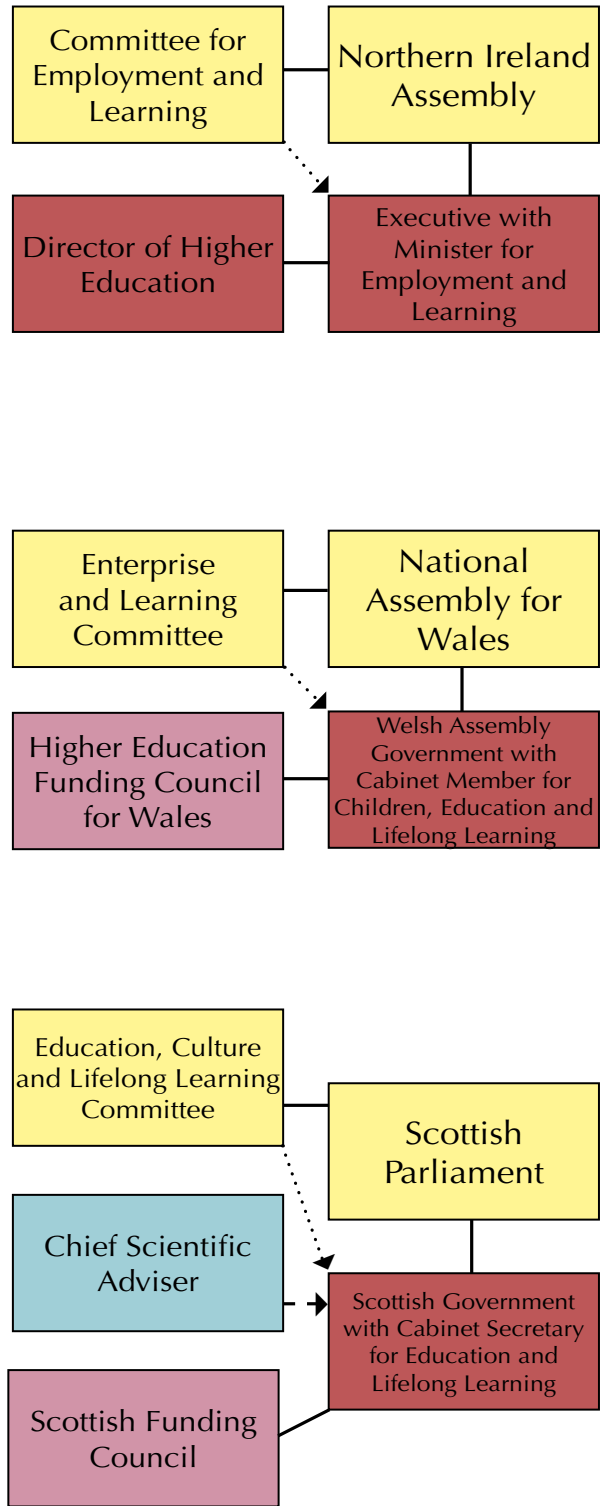
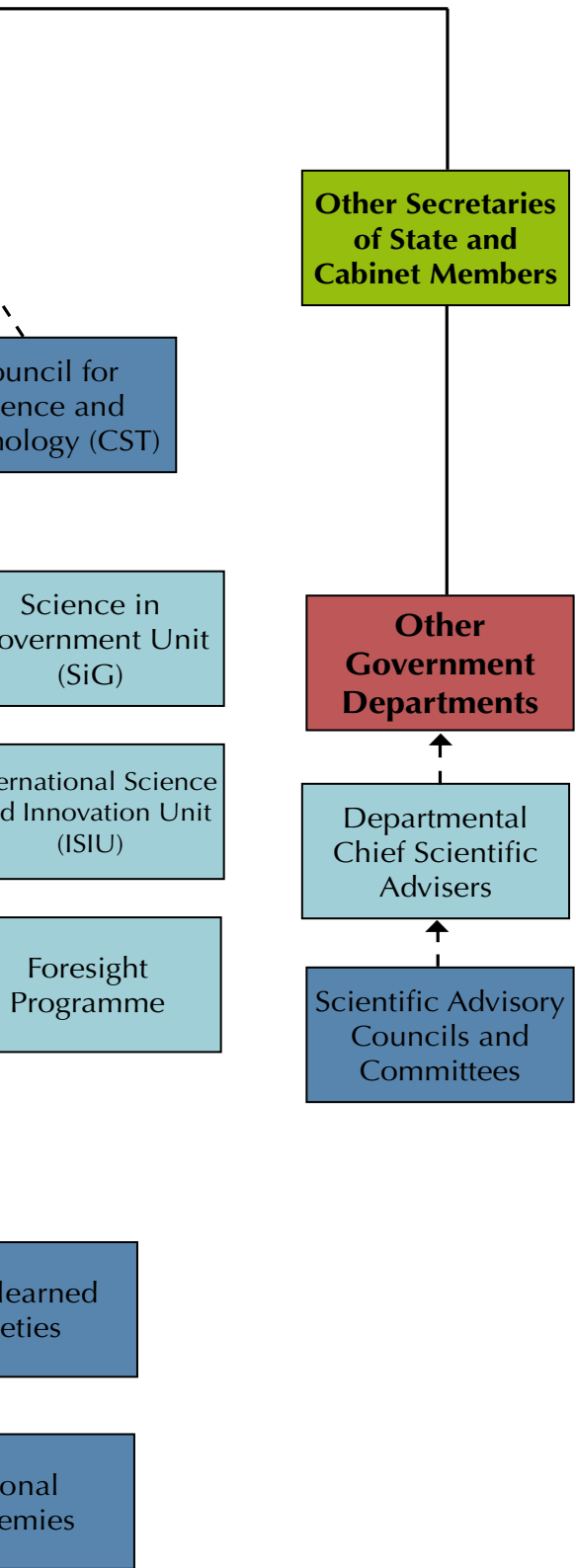
- support for business through agencies such as the Office for Life Sciences and the UK Innovation Investment Fund;
- regional economic development, with a particular responsibility for the regional development agencies in England;
- research and development, and support for investment through agencies such as the Technology Strategy Board and the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA).



**Lines of relationships:**

- accountability
- - - - - advice
- ..... scrutiny

- Government Ministers
- Parliament
- Government Departments
- Executive NDPBs
- Government Advisers
- Advisery NDPBs and learned societies



## 6. BIS non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs) and partners

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BIS supports a number of NDPBs and partners in developing policy and providing funding for research.

### Non-departmental public bodies

The most important of the NDPBs are:

- **Research Councils:** there are seven Research Councils, each covering a broad disciplinary area. Taken together, they are the principal vehicle for the public funding of research in the UK, responsible for the bulk of the Science Budget of over £3.5bn. They operate through grant programmes and some run their own research institutes. Research Councils UK (RCUK) is a strategic partnership between the Councils, enabling them to work together and enhance the overall performance and impact of UK research.
- **Technology Strategy Board (TSB):** the TSB's purpose is to promote, accelerate and invest in technology-enabled innovation in the UK, with a budget of c£200m a year to invest in research and development projects, and technology demonstrators.
- **National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA):** NESTA works in partnership with other organisations and individuals to invest in early-stage companies, inform policy, and deliver practical programmes that inspire others to solve the big challenges of the future.
- **Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE):** HEFCE distributes public funding for teaching and research to universities and colleges in England. For research, it operates a selective funding system that allocates c£1.9bn in grants primarily by reference to assessments of research excellence and also seeks to maintain and develop the research infrastructure.





## Academies and learned societies

Academies and learned societies are organisations established to promote scholarly disciplines, and some act as professional bodies. In some cases, membership is restricted to those who are elected by existing members or fellows. They are not part of Government, but they may lobby for changes in Government policy, and Government may consult them on matters germane to their interests.

The three National Academies – the Royal Society, the British Academy, and the Royal Academy of Engineering – have special status in their relationships with BIS, which provides funding to enable them to support and develop the UK's best researchers through prestigious research fellowships and associated programmes. BIS also uses them as sources of authoritative, impartial advice.

## 7. UK Parliamentary bodies

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### Select committees

Parliament is made up of the House of Commons, which is elected by universal suffrage, and the House of Lords, whose members are nominated. Members of both Houses sit either on Government or Opposition benches – although some Lords also sit as independent cross-benchers. Government Ministers and Opposition spokespeople make up the front bench; other members are known as backbenchers.

The House of Commons and the House of Lords each has a Select Committee on Science and Technology, whose job is to scrutinise Government policy and practice relating to science, technology and research. The committees operate primarily by undertaking enquiries on specific issues; and publishing reports based on the evidence they gather from expert witnesses.

The Commons committee is made up of backbench MPs in proportion to party strength in the House, but works on a largely non-partisan basis. It has the additional role of examining the expenditure, administration and policies of the Government Office for Science and publicly-funded research organisations such as the Research Councils.

The Lords committee includes both party-political appointees and independent cross-benchers, often with an expert academic or research background. It works principally through enquiries undertaken by sub-committees appointed afresh for each enquiry.

### Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST)

POST is Parliament's in-house source of independent analysis of science and technology issues of public policy interest. It seeks to inform debates by producing briefings (POSTNotes); and it organises discussion to raise awareness of important issues. POST works with other organisations within Government and without, including the Select Committees, the All-Parliamentary Groups, Government Departments and NDPBs, learned societies, think tanks, and other bodies in the commercial and voluntary sectors.

## All-Parliamentary Groups (APPGs)

These are interest groups composed of members of the Commons or Lords, both backbenchers and Ministers; and some non-parliamentarians. They have no official status, and their role is informal. The two groups most relevant to science and research are:

- the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee, which focuses on issues where science and politics meet, informing members of the relevance of scientific and technological developments to matters of public interest and public policy;
- the Medical Research APPG, which facilitates cooperation between medical research bodies and parliamentarians, by providing up-to-date information about developments in medical research, public health, medical ethics, and the social implications of research findings.



## 8. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

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### Scotland

A number of Directorates of the Scottish Government have responsibilities for science and research, and the Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA) is responsible for cross-cutting science issues across the Government, in partnership with the Chief Scientists in Health and Environment. The CSA is co-chair of the Scottish Science Advisory Committee, and heads the Office of the Chief Scientific Adviser (OCSA), which comprises two small units dealing with science across Government, and science and society.

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning is responsible among other things for policy and the funding of higher education in Scotland. The Government's Directorate for Lifelong Learning advises Ministers and implements policy. Funding is distributed to individual universities by the Scottish Funding Council, which covers both further and higher education. The Scottish Parliament scrutinises this work through its Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee.

### Wales

The Welsh Assembly Government's Cabinet Member for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills is responsible, among other things, for higher education policy and funding. He is supported in this by a Skills, Higher Education and Lifelong Learning Group within his Department. Funding is distributed to individual universities by the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW). The National Assembly for Wales scrutinises this work through its Enterprise and Learning Committee.

### Northern Ireland

The Northern Ireland Executive's Minister for Employment and Learning is responsible, among other things, for higher education policy and funding. He is supported in this by a Director of Higher Education within his Department. The work is scrutinised by the Northern Ireland Assembly's Committee for Employment and Learning.

# Resources

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British Academy [www.britac.ac.uk](http://www.britac.ac.uk)

Council for Science and Technology (CST) [www.cst.gov.uk](http://www.cst.gov.uk)

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) [www.bis.gov.uk](http://www.bis.gov.uk)

Global Science and Innovation Forum  
[www.bis.gov.uk/policies/science/isiu/international/gcif](http://www.bis.gov.uk/policies/science/isiu/international/gcif)

Government Office for Science (GO-Science) [www.bis.gov.uk/goscience](http://www.bis.gov.uk/goscience)

Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) [www.hefce.ac.uk](http://www.hefce.ac.uk)

Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HFCW) [www.hefcw.ac.uk](http://www.hefcw.ac.uk)

House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee  
[www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/science-and-technology-committee](http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/science-and-technology-committee)

House of Lords Science and Technology Select Committee  
[www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/lords-select/science-and-technology-committee](http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/lords-select/science-and-technology-committee)

International Science and Innovation Unit [www.bis.gov.uk/policies/science/isiu](http://www.bis.gov.uk/policies/science/isiu)

National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA) [www.nesta.org.uk](http://www.nesta.org.uk)

Northern Ireland Department for Employment and Learning [www.delni.gov.uk](http://www.delni.gov.uk)

Office for Life Sciences [www.bis.gov.uk/ols](http://www.bis.gov.uk/ols)

Parliamentary and Scientific Committee [www.vmine.net/scienceinparliament](http://www.vmine.net/scienceinparliament)

Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST)  
[www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/offices/bicameral/post](http://www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/offices/bicameral/post)

# Resources

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Research Councils UK (RCUK) [www.rcuk.ac.uk](http://www.rcuk.ac.uk)

Royal Academy of Engineering [www.raeng.org.uk](http://www.raeng.org.uk)

Royal Society [www.royalsociety.org](http://www.royalsociety.org)

Science and Innovation Network [www.bis.gov.uk/policies/science/isiu/sin](http://www.bis.gov.uk/policies/science/isiu/sin)

Science and Society Secretariat [www.bis.gov.uk/policies/science/science-and-society](http://www.bis.gov.uk/policies/science/science-and-society)

Science in Engineering and Government report  
[www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/goscience/docs/s/science-engineering-government.pdf](http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/goscience/docs/s/science-engineering-government.pdf)

Scottish Funding Council [www.sfc.ac.uk](http://www.sfc.ac.uk)

Scottish Government Education and Training [www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Education](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Education)

Scottish Government Office of the Chief Scientific Adviser  
[www.scotland.gov.uk/About/Directorates/Smarter/Chief-Scientific-Adviser](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/About/Directorates/Smarter/Chief-Scientific-Adviser)

Technology Strategy Board (TSB) [www.innovateuk.org](http://www.innovateuk.org)

UK Innovation Investment Fund [www.bis.gov.uk/ukiif](http://www.bis.gov.uk/ukiif)

Welsh Assembly Government Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills  
<http://wales.gov.uk/about/civilservice/departments/dcells/?lang=en>

This guide is available at [www.rin.ac.uk/government-research-policy](http://www.rin.ac.uk/government-research-policy)

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