

Wanted: UK science czar. Generous compensation. Not for the faint-hearted.

The top job in UK research is up for grabs, so who might apply?

Elizabeth Gibney

02 September 2016

Do you have a high scientific standing? A wide appreciation of different research disciplines? Fancy earning £300,000 (\$400,000)? If so, the UK government has a job for you.

The [advertisement](#) for chief executive of the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) — arguably the biggest job in UK science — went online on 30 August, prompting speculation about who might fill the role. Current favourites are UK university chiefs whose experience leading big interdisciplinary organizations prepares them to helm a body that will join together [the UK's nine existing research funding bodies](#).

The salary — well beyond that of most working scientists and roughly twice what heads of existing UK research councils earn — “demonstrates the ambition that’s there to recruit a really serious, heavy-weight person”, says James Wilsdon, who studies research policy at the University of Sheffield.

The wage should be high enough to lure university heads, says John Womersley, chief executive of the UK Science and Technology Facilities Council in Swindon. Including pensions and benefits, heads of UK universities, known as vice-chancellors, earned an average of around £270,000 in 2014–15, according to a survey by *Times Higher Education*. “So that’s the talent pool they want to fish in,” says Womersley.

Power pull

The advertisement comes in advance of the legislation that will form the UKRI, the Higher Education and Research Bill, which has not yet passed through Parliament. The body will unite several disparate organizations: the seven research councils; the research funding activities of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (to be named Research England); and innovation funder Innovate UK. Expected to start in 2018, the UKRI head will oversee an annual budget exceeding £6 billion. The bill’s wording leaves much open to interpretation, and the UKRI’s first chief executive will have a huge amount of power to shape the research system, says Wilsdon.

Policy specialists are already narrowing their list of possible candidates. Experience running a large, research-heavy university could be desirable, as will being a fellow of the Royal Society (the UK’s national science academy), says Wilsdon. “That would keep the academies happy and demonstrate that he or she is ‘one of us’,” he says. “So already you start to think, who does that leave?”

Possible candidates

People who tick those boxes, according to policy experts, include Nancy Rothwell, vice-chancellor of the University of Manchester, and Keith Burnett, vice-chancellor of the University of Sheffield. Rothwell has advised the UK prime minister on science policy, as co-chair of the Council for Science and Technology. Another possible candidate with government experience is Adrian Smith, vice-chancellor of the University of London and former director general of knowledge and innovation in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

Other names touted include John Bell, former president of the Academy of Medical Sciences, and Leszek Borysiewicz, vice-chancellor of the University of Cambridge, UK, and former head of the UK Medical Research Council (MRC). According to Wilsdon, appointing a biomedical scientist might seem particularly attractive: among the current research funders, he says the MRC was the most resistant to the new body.

Candidates need not come from the United Kingdom, says Womersley. “Universities have started recruiting vice-chancellors from overseas, and this may be similar — someone who has run a large research system in another country might actually be a good candidate,” he says.

Whoever takes on the job should prepare themselves for a headache, adds Wilsdon. The chief executive will have to figure out how to

run the new organization, including how to maintain the status of the existing research councils. "It's far from clear that anyone, even ticking all these boxes, would come in and easily navigate through this stuff," he says.

Applications close on 26 September.

Nature | doi:10.1038/nature.2016.20531