BACKGROUND :

About Interface-The knowledge connection for business

Encouraging company-based Research & Development (R&D) and better, value-added links between business and Universities and Research institutes are key factors in improving competitiveness and ensuring that the economic benefits of innovation and discovery are harnessed for the whole Scottish economy.

Interface-The knowledge connection for business (Interface), in providing a central point of access to the Scottish research base, aims to ease, facilitate and support industrial, and particularly Scottish, small to medium sized enterprise (SME) engagement. Our client companies range from large global organisations to small innovative companies in remote regions of the Highlands and Islands. To date over 850 new collaborative projects have been facilitated, from studentships and short term feasibility studies to longer term research collaborations, with a strong pipeline of activity of 600 open business specifications. A wide range of case studies can be found at: http://www.interface-online.org.uk. To date over 500 food and drink businesses have availed of support from the Interface team.

Interface is a free and impartial brokerage service for businesses that provides a single point of access to the specialist expertise and facilities available in all Scottish Universities and Research Institutions. Engagement via Interface can provide companies with the opportunity to develop new products/services, create new jobs, increase sales, grow profits, improve efficiency and increase turnover. With increasing priority placed on engagement with small to medium sized enterprises (SMEs), often not the most commercially advantageous relationship for a University, by Scottish Government and the Scottish Funding Council, Interface provides a cost-effective means for the 23 partner University and Research Institutions from across Scotland to identify SMEs and other companies for collaborative working and the opportunity to build lasting relationships.

Interface-Food & Drink provides a current model of a sector stream operation to contribute to the Food and drink sector in Scotland working closely with Scotland Food and Drink.

- The activities undertaken by the Interface Food & Drink team were informed by extensive consultation with businesses in the sector supported by the Sector industry leadership group – Scotland Food and Drink - through a scoping study. From this the sector prioritised supporting indigenous businesses through outreach to respond to industry requirements and to challenge industry to adopt relevant technologies that offer competitive advantage. Industry's view was that the Interface brand offered the impartiality and responsiveness that they required and would deliver a seamless operation of "no wrong door".
- The Interface Food & Drink team offer complementary support to the core Interface operations and in particular are supporting (i) groups of businesses and academics to come together to address generic issues through common interest groups such as waste and new product development (ii) identifying disruptive technologies in

academic institutions that would have a significant impact on the developing of new food and drink products and processes. Around seven common interest groups are currently underway involving 84 businesses with topics ranging from rapeseed oil, venison and statistical modelling. A further five themes are progressing to form groups.

- The structure of the support offered by the team enables widespread and impartial engagement with the HEIs and with trade associations and levy bodies by having Technology Translators and Business Engagement Executives based in different universities with integration of line management and reporting.
- The team is both outwardly focused on responding to business needs and drawing on the best practices of the core Interface operations along with inward focused working on building capacity within the HEIs to respond to the sectors requirements through identification of relevant technologies from other disciplines that offer considerable competitive advantage to Scottish businesses in developing new food and drink products.
- Considerable effort and resources have been required to ensure that the inward facing teams complement the business development staff at each HEI and are not seen as duplicating effort or indeed a threat to delivering targets.

Our experiences have also shown that the key challenge is directly influencing businesses to consider collaborating with academia; considerable resources are necessary to boost the demand side. This requires working directly with businesses and their supporting mechanisms eg. trade associations. The objective of the Interface staff is to ***"Get it right for business"*** by offering companies a less confusing and less complicated landscape so that simplifying "*the academic landscape for business*" is actually achieved. The commodity which is frequently in shortest supply for an SME is time. When time is limited they require a clear and straightforward path to follow to progress matters. We already know that SMEs find the existing landscape of Government support complex and confusing.

KE encompasses a spectrum of activities and methods of business – academic engagement from accessing facilities to longer term research collaborations. The activities supported by Interface largely concern **outreach to businesses** and facilitation of business-university collaborations through intelligent brokering and common interest groups.

Stimulating and supporting engagement between SMEs and HEIs across local regions in Scotland from Dumfries to Inverness is the core of current Interface operations and is delivered through having "staff on the ground" throughout Scotland that are out and about and proactively meeting companies both across all regions and all sectors. This regional delivery model has supported the development of long term, mutually beneficial, sustainable relationships of value between SMEs and academia through demand led engagement.

The current Interface model and its relationship with the Universities and Research Institutions is a successful one showing year on year growth in industry demand and delivery of facilitated collaborations. Providing a central point of access that has good links to all academic institutions is seen by industry as a simple and cost effective way to explore relevant knowledge and expertise. Interface has established considerable reputation and brand awareness amongst businesses and the intermediaries that are supporting them in Scotland. Our recent survey to 250 businesses that have been supported by Interface in the past three years yielded a 92% satisfaction rating compared to a satisfaction rating of 78% for HEIs by the businesses.

BiGGAR Economics Ltd undertook an economic impact study to review the impacts emerging from businesses supported by Interface from August 2005 to the end of February 2013. The survey focused on businesses that have progressed to a discussion with a potential academic partner rather than all the businesses that have been supported by Interface to date. These responses were used to estimate the current and future impact of the assistance that Interface has provided. The report concluded that that the overall economic impact is as follows:

- Interface currently contributes £17.1m GVA per year and supports 360 jobs
- It has been estimated that within 3–5 years, this impact will have increased to £79.9m GVA and 2,399 jobs

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to this consultation and offer perspectives from directly supporting businesses to collaborate with Research institutes and Universities over a number of years.

CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

Question 1: Do the 2011-2016 strategic priorities remain robust and relevant for the period 2016-2021?

The priorities as outlined are all-encompassing and extremely wide ranging. More specific priorities would bring a degree of focus to research which in times of limited funding would ensure the maximum outputs and outcomes could be delivered.

Question 2: Do these 'enabling principles' set the right context or should additional principles be adopted?

Comments
The enabling principles do set the right context. However, as they are very broad and wide ranging it is important to recognise that there are many different organisations in Scotland that are helping to support these principles from Enterprise agencies, Trade bodies, Universities, Interface, Innovation centres etc.

Going forward a main priority for the Rural Affairs and Environment Research Strategy team would be that the outputs from the strategic priorities are clearly disseminated to organisations that can support the enabling principles. This will be key to avoid duplication of resources.

Question 3: Are the high level outcomes sufficiently clear, if not, what changes would you propose?

No comment

Question 4: Are the three broad themes identified an appropriate way of structuring our work? If not, what alternatives should be considered?

While the themes represent a reasonable way of structuring work, they may not take into account the trade-offs that may be required and do not recognise that there may be times when certain priorities may supersede others; e.g. one theme supports health and well-being while another aims for a profitable food and drink industry.

The Scottish Government needs to recognise that there will be times when these two aims are incompatible and to offer guidance as to which will take priority.

Question 5: How can the SG maximise the benefits of on-going investment in the MRPs to build and benefit from connectivity with the wider science base?

Areas of co-operation with other organisations would allow the SG maximise the benefits of on-going investment in the MRPs to build and benefit from connectivity with the wider science base. Suggested examples

include

- Joint competitive calls with Interface food and drink (Interface food and drink frequently runs a completion for HEIs to collaborate with industry). There must be much greater visibility of the MRP's work within the HEIs; joint calls will assist with the MRPs being aware of work in the HEIs and vice versa.
- Annual review of impacts arising from joint activities disseminated widely to all partners including Scotland Food and Drink
- Greater co-operation with SFC as funders

Question 6: What are your views of the performance and operation of the CoEs to date, are there any additional areas that would benefit from such support?

The CoEs need to be more high profile in disseminating their outputs and performance. In particular their applicability to the wider Scottish food and drink industry eg. processing, manufacturing needs to be considered

Question 7: Do you agree with the SG's proposal to end support for SPs and to explore alternative mechanisms to strengthen engagement between its investment in research and the business sectors it aims to support?

The food sector in Scotland in particular struggles to articulate its requirements for longer term innovation (and in turn, research). Without ways of disseminating the outcomes from the Rural Affairs and Environment research, business focused research is likely to become more short term and, by definition, less innovative.

In looking at the alternative mechanisms to strengthen engagement between its investment in research and the business sectors they must be outward focused, looking internationally and looking outside the food sector to draw on best practice and ideas. Those involved would need to be skilled at seeing how developments in other areas might be applied in the food sector.

The SG should look to mechanisms already in place to strengthen links between research and business and avoid duplication by adding more initiatives to an already crowded landscape.

For example as highlighted

- Interface brokerage – supports individual businesses in all regions of Scotland both rural and urban
- Interface food and drink through the methodology of common interest groups is tackling key issues for the food and drink industry. (but the supply side limited to HEIs and currently MRPs expertise cannot be included)

We would welcome an open discussion on the track record of Interface in this area and how our experiences can be better utilised to support

engagement between the Rural Affairs and Environment investment in research and the business sectors.

Question 8: Do you have any proposals for how the research portfolio can better link to the business community to deliver the desired outcome?

The following approaches would offer clear mechanisms in order for the research portfolio to better link to the business community

- Involve the business community more in the commissioning of research and in its shaping.
- Build on existing initiatives eg. Interface who have considerable experience in supporting rural and food and drink businesses. We would welcome an open discussion on track record of Interface in this area and how experiences can be better utilised to support engagement between its investment in research and the business sectors.
- Work in partnership with Scotland food and drink and trade bodies,
- Look at how the recently launched Innovation centres offer an approach for specific sectors

Question 9: Is the purpose and value of underpinning capacity sufficiently clear, if not how can it be improved?

No comment

Question 10: Do you have any views regarding the performance and use of the Contract Research Fund including how it could be improved?

No comment

Question 11: Could the overall delivery model be further simplified in a way which still enables SG to meet its strategic priorities for the portfolio, if so how?

No comment

Question 12: Do you have specific suggestions as to how the RESAS research strategy can contribute to the delivery of the objectives of the CAMERAS partnership?

No comment

Question 13: Do you have any suggestions for developing the partnership with other research funders?

Developing the partnership with other research funders is goal of other organisations and agencies including SFC, SE, HIE, therefore it is imperative that SG ensures that there is a joined up approach and good communication.

For Interface Food & Drink, the struggle remains to understand what other initiatives are present, what they offer, what funding they provide; it becomes almost impossible to offer businesses a properly joined up approach.

This means that all funding providers risk losing credibility in the eyes of the business community due to complexity and perceived duplication. More holistic ways of working for all publicly funded initiatives must be found – they must all recognise the value each contributes and be prepared to accept each other and work with each other. Communication and partnership working will be key.

Question 14: Do you have any particular suggestions as to how greater engagement with the HEI sector might be achieved?

We would welcome an open discussion on the track record of Interface in this area and how our experiences can be better utilised to support collaboration between HEIs and RIs for example support for competitive calls with industry for exploitation of research.

Question 15: Are the research outputs from the RESAS portfolio of research readily accessible or can this be further improved, if so how?

The research outputs from the RESAS portfolio of research are less readily accessible to business base – eg food and drink companies.

Our experience shows that they need to be “translated” so that businesses can clearly see the benefits and understand how the outputs can be absorbed into the business for improving products, processes or services.

It is important that SG seek advice from the business community on how to disseminate information and to whom.

Question 16: Is the current performance management approach fit for purpose or can it be improved, if so how?

Given the importance of underpinning principles of innovation SRPB would be strengthened by addition of industry members and closer co-operation with SFC, SF&D HIE and SE.