

Independent Climate Change E-mails Review

Notes of interview with Professor Trevor Davies, PVC Research, Enterprise and Engagement

Interviewers: Sir Muir Russell & David Eyton

Interview carried out by telephone on 15 June 2010.

Background

1. Sir Muir Russell and David Eyton briefly summarized the purpose of the call, which built on information received during their visit on 26 March 2010. The interview was aimed at understanding UEA's risk management process, particularly as it relates to issues which might impact the university's reputation.

Advance material

2. Professor Davies shared in advance of the call two documents – “Research Planning – Guidelines for Deans of Faculty and Heads of School” and “Risk Strategy/Management in Research” [The UEA considers this documentation to be confidential so it is not disclosed with this record].

Risk Management

3. We asked for an overview of UEA's risk management processes. The University maintains a risk register, which is regularly reviewed by Senior Management and is considered annually by the Council and the Audit Committee. Professor Davies was also familiar research risk management, having been a member of the NERC audit committee.
4. He said that UEA was concerned about any slippage in research excellence league tables. Therefore UEA's objective was to increase the amount of highly rated research. Mechanisms which supported this were: peer review to test the honesty and quality of work; the testing process of having to apply for highly competitive funding; the checks implicit in co-authorship of research papers; the scrutiny of papers for RAE/REF; and participation in external processes such as journal editorship and IPCC.
5. When asked specifically about the increasing frequency of FOIA requests, he said that these were seen as an informal signal in the immediate run-up to COP15 in Copenhagen. He became aware of the increased frequency of FOIA requests in the summer a week or so before the stolen emails were released and although there was some discussion about the appropriate response, they were overtaken by events. He had relied on assurances from the IPCM and there were no indications of having breached the FOIA. He acknowledged that there was a link between research integrity and appropriate transparency, and the intersection between research integrity and FOIA responses should now be clearer. Details of the frequency of FOIA requests to CRU in the summer were well known to those who had formal roles in dealing with the requests, but were not disseminated widely outside that group..
6. It became clear that the university needed to confirm that there was wide awareness of FOIA legislation, and so sessions have been held with the Heads of

School and Heads of Divisions on FOIA, introduced by the Vice Chancellor with Pro-Vice Chancellors also present, to talk about it, including its application to e-mail correspondence, with the IPCM explaining the technicalities.

7. We asked more generally about the allegation that the CRU was perceived to be defensive. Professor Davies recognised that the CRU had been targeted by certain critics, but there was no perception at the time that the intensity of interest in the CRU was about to rise so dramatically. There had been informal discussions about striking a balance between transparency and academic freedom, but nothing formal.
8. We asked whether the CRU featured in UEA's risk register. Professor Davies said that CRU was recognised as a very important part of UEA – that is why it had been given more established posts. He recognized that with hindsight more support might have been given to keep its data management and archiving up to scratch. The University would have considered this carefully had a case been presented, but he reckoned that CRU would not have felt deficient in this respect.
9. He added that failures in corporate IT systems had always been high on the risk register but CRU-specific IT risks (which may have resulted in the improper publication of information) were not identified. The prominence of IT security had since been increased in the risk register.
10. Professor Davies concluded by saying that risk management processes were under review in UEA, and would be updated once the ICCER's report had been published. In retrospect it was obvious that the climate science community had not taken on board the severity of the challenge being made to its work, nor the depth of assurance required by some as governments confronted climate change issues, given the potential impacts on economic systems and wealth redistribution. In terms of research risks, there is now a perception that climate science was right up there with medical sciences and drug trials. The UEA certainly did not want another such event.
11. In the meantime, senior UEA management were seeking regular verbal updates on activities in the CRU and awareness was certainly higher, and the process of risk management is now being formalized with the Planning and Resources Committee agreeing that issues surrounding CRU should be added to the Risk Register. Amongst the mitigation measures itemized is the commissioning (and consideration of the report of) the Muir Russell Review which is examining the scientific practice of CRU, issues of peer review, data security and FOI.

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