

May 1996

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## Review of the International Council of Scientific Unions

*The Royal Society's contribution to the review of ICSU*

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### Introduction

The Royal Society is the UK adhering body to ICSU, and has been so since ICSU was created in 1931. The UK has been actively involved in ICSU and most components of the ICSU family over the last 60 years. Currently the Society spends over £500K p.a. on ICSU family activities, and these links represent a major part of the Society's international relations.

In common with reviewing other activities the Society has recently been reviewing its international work. It welcomed the parallel announcement by ICSU in October 1994 that an independent review would be conducted to assess the mission, organizational structure and operational modes of ICSU. The Royal Society's submission has been prepared by a group set up by the Society's Scientific Unions Committee (SUC) and has been endorsed by Council. The Group was led by Dr J. Tooze and comprised Professor J.H. Coates, Professor J.A.K. Howard, Professor R.M. Perham and Professor A.P. Willmore. The Secretary was Miss R.A. Cooper.

The ICSU Review Group (Chairman, R.W. Schmitt) invited the Society to respond to a number of specific questions. We have addressed these questions and, in addition, have raised further questions for the review group's consideration.

### Should ICSUs mandate be modified and if so how?

ICSUs current mandate is expressed in its stated objectives:

- (a) to encourage and promote international scientific and technological activity for the benefit and well-being of humanity;
- (b) to facilitate coordination of the activities of the Scientific Union Members;

(c) to facilitate coordination of the inter-national scientific activities of its National Scientific Members;

(d) to stimulate, design, coordinate or participate in the implementation of international interdisciplinary scientific programmes;

(e) to act as a consultative body on scientific issues that have an international dimension;

(f) to engage in any related activities.

These objectives need not so much to be modified as to be prioritised and focused on identified needs of the next 10 years. The ICSU Review Group should produce some proposals on what it thinks the needs of the international scientific community will be over the next 10 years and seek ICSU's consideration of these.

ICSU itself has a low profile among the general scientific community. Its main aim should be to meet the needs of its National and Union members and to represent international science in dealings with other global bodies such as UNESCO and OECD. We discuss later the effectiveness with which it is currently achieving these aims.

In general, *the value of ICSU lies in the fact that it embodies the international character of science*. The UK is highly supportive of international science and strongly supports ICSU's encouragement and promotion of international scientific and technological activity. This function of ICSU will be all the more important as science is increasingly drawn into the economic competition between nations.

## **ICSU's Objectives and their Achievement**

*Objective (a)* to some extent summarises all the objectives of ICSU. Here ICSU has taken some valuable initiatives, notably through the work of the Standing Committee on Freedom in the Conduct of Science (SCFCS) and the Committee on Capacity Building in Science (CCBS) and in its relations with UNESCO. We look to ICSU to continue to identify opportunities of this sort where it is uniquely suited to play a role.

Union members are best placed to comment on the achievement of *objective (b)*. We hope that as part of the process of this review, they are specifically asked:

(i) to what extent they would wish their activities coordinated;

(ii) to what extent do they feel any coordination of their activities with those of other Unions would occur without the help of ICSU;

(iii) what difference being a member of ICSU has made to them.

This last question is of particular relevance to newer Union members, and to applicants.

*Objective (c)* sounds as if it ought to be important. However, it is not clear what it has meant (or could mean) in practice, beyond the activities already covered under objective (a). In any event, ICSU will need to reassess this particular coordinating role in the light of the recent establishment of the InterAcademy Panel on International Issues and the work of various regional groupings of Academies.

However, ICSU does provide a means by which a wide range of scientific communities can participate in international scientific activities not directed by its Union members, and fulfills a useful role in filling possible gaps. ICSU should examine the degree of relevance of its activities to its different categories of members, and ask itself whether it does enough for its members.

With reference to meeting *objective (d)*, there is no doubt that ICSU has been successful. For example, the International Geophysical Year did much to promote international research. However, ICSU must ensure that its support for these interdisciplinary programmes is not continued for longer than necessary; once the programmes are up and running they should either stand on their own, or be of fixed life. ICSU should not nurture them in perpetuity. A rolling review of interdisciplinary programmes and committees should be carried out to ensure that the work these bodies do:

- (i) meets the original aims of the body and is still important;
- (ii) complements rather than overlaps with other ICSU activities and activities outside ICSU;
- (iii) could not be done more effectively and/or efficiently in another way and/or by different bodies.

*Objective (e)* - There is also a place for an international scientific body to provide advice on the scientific aspects of international policy issues, such as ICSU did for the UNCED and Agenda 21. If ICSU sees itself in this role, it needs to be more visible in offering advice and have its advice sought. To be effective there must be a decision making process that is fast and has the confidence of the membership on whose behalf it speaks. In giving advice, ICSU must be clear on whose behalf it is speaking - the membership, the Executive, etc - and that it has adequate authority to do so. It is harder to imagine that giving advice on policy for science could be a major role for ICSU given the wide range of its national and regional members; guidelines can certainly be drawn up on issues such as the use of animals in research, but it is hard to foresee an instance how ICSU might, for example, attempt to advise on research priorities.

More generally, we are invited to consider ICSU as the voice of international science. This beguiling phrase begs the question of where the ear for international science is to be found. UNESCO may not be a sufficiently robust answer to sustain this among ICSU's high priority objectives. It may be that one manifestation of this international role lies in ICSU helping National Members deal with certain advice activities at local level.

## **Membership**

With three complementary categories of member - Unions, National Members and Associate Members - ICSU occupies a unique position in the world of non-governmental science. There may be scope for ICSU to exploit more vigorously the opportunities this provides, both in the services it offers its members and in its dealings with the outside world.

The different benefits of full Union and Associate membership should be more clearly defined, and policy established to ascertain the most appropriate category for international scientific bodies to belong to ICSU.

The policy on admission of new members should be examined. What is the rationale for admitting new members? What mechanism, if any, exists for expelling members (of all categories) if they have not contributed to or participated in the work of ICSU over a certain number of years? If no such mechanism exists, ICSU should devise one and implement it. In summary, *there should be set criteria for membership which new members would need to meet and existing ones continue to fulfil*. This is considered further in the next section.

## **Relevance of work to members**

The work of ICSU should more overtly reflect the needs of its members expressed through discussion at General Assemblies. The resulting portfolio of activities should then automatically be of relevance and value to scientists and appreciated for that.

*There should be a process within ICSU for focusing on specific high priority areas. A prioritisation of objectives will help achieve this. There should be an effective dynamic core programme which is continually assessed.*

## **Finance and Administration of ICSU**

On finance, we have five recommendations. The first is that ICSU define its core activities - niche areas such as SCFCS and the basic administration needed to support the organisation as a whole. Of the subscriptions currently paid by members, a maximum of two-thirds should be used for core activities. This would allow members to use the remaining one-third to buy into specific activities on an à la carte basis. This is similar to the method which the European Science Foundation operates. This would force ICSU to identify and concentrate on areas of highest priority, would ensure that all activities had the explicit support of the members, and would thus enhance both effectiveness and accountability.

Second, the current practice of not *charging full economic cost* on monies handled by ICSU received from outside organisations needs amendment.

Third, the practice of National Members' subscriptions to ICSU and ICSU Scientific Members, and two-way financial transactions between ICSU and its Scientific Members, should be examined to *ensure that unnecessary duplication of effort is eliminated*. If the organisations conduct their business in different currencies, the minimisation of currency transactions will decrease the loss in exchange charges. The accounts of ICSU, the Unions and interdisciplinary bodies need to be reviewed across the board to ensure that there is no unnecessary wastage.

Fourth, ICSU should consider whether it could usefully *provide guidance to the Unions on best practice in matters of finance and general administration*. While there is no necessary virtue in uniformity, it may be that Unions could benefit from knowing about alternative approaches.

Fifth, at a time when many publicly funded bodies are not automatically compensated for inflation, *ICSU must rigorously justify any proposed increase in subscription rates, including those related to inflation*.

On administration, our main concern is that the General Committee as currently constituted is too large. ICSU's three tier structure for defining policy and strategy seems unnecessarily cumbersome and imposes an unnecessary financial burden. *A more streamlined version of the General Committee should be established, with*

proportional representation from National and Union members based on financial contributions, and fewer members overall. A Union forum could be established to ensure the Unions had the opportunity for discussion of and input to General Committee business.

*The administrative processes need to be made as transparent as possible; for example, resolutions from General Assemblies need to be followed up and the results made public; if they are not followed through the members of ICSU need to be informed specifically why.*

*ICSU should take the opportunity to exploit developments in electronic communication - a lot could be achieved very cheaply, in disseminating information, with care taken to ensure that members without electronic communication still receive paper copies.*

The Paris Secretariat of ICSU seems to us to be the right size for a demanding role and to provide an effective service to members.

## **Achievement of effective collaboration with partners and identity of ICSU**

The partners of ICSU would be well placed to comment on the effectiveness of ICSU's collaboration, and should be asked to do so.

ICSU is correctly, and valuably, identified as an international non-governmental organisation. The proposed alternative of an international professional organisation carries with it the implication of representing *individuals* rather than organisations, and is inappropriate.

Impact on the Policy Sector

See discussion of *objective e*

Overlap with other bodies

We have already mentioned the need for ICSU to assess its role vis-à-vis the National Members in the light of the InterAcademy Panel. Similarly, the increasing activity in policy advice of regional bodies like the European Union (EU), ALLEA (All European Academies) and European Science Foundation, and inter-governmental bodies such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and UNESCO, challenges ICSU to define more precisely that part of its agenda. However, we are confident that ICSU will continue to be able to identify a unique and worthwhile niche.

## **General**

We consider ICSU's value lies in three basic areas:

(a) acting as a facilitator on policy issues between non-governmental organisations and inter-governmental organisations such as UNESCO; the individual Unions would not be able to do this for themselves - ICSU provides a framework;

(b) running activities such as the SCFCS, which need a focus to be efficient and effective;

(c) coordinating interdisciplinary activities.

*The way ICSU reviews its inter-disciplinary bodies needs to be examined. At present national members are not automatically asked for input and this should be rectified, and the whole process made more transparent. ICSU should be encouraged to disband its interdisciplinary bodies when they have fulfilled their original purpose, and not start new interdisciplinary activities unless there is an existing activity which can be pruned to make way for the new.*

*ICSU should be aware of emerging opportunities to set up new scientific committees and promote interdisciplinary activities.*

The environment that ICSU operates in is altering. For example, the EU is growing, and there is more cooperation between the natural and social sciences. ICSU should report on how it has responded to the development of regional political funding bodies like the EU, and whether they have made any difference to ICSU's activity.