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From the Physical Secretary and Vice-President Professor JE Enderby CBE FRS
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Dear Dr Simmonds

I welcome the review of LINK. The Scheme provides an excellent opportunity for academe and industry to work together on pre-competitive research that is of mutual interest, but there are areas where improvement may be possible.

The areas include the number and range of participants that may be appropriate, the duration of support, and the administration of the scheme, both in terms of timing of calls and the effort in applying in relation to the success rate.

The LINK Scheme requires that any project is supported by the formation of a collaborative partnership between a number of industrial and academic groups, and targets pre-competitive research in basic science rather than near-to-market research. The Scheme clearly does offer a valuable route for SMEs to be involved in research that may deliver exploitable results and for which they could not themselves provide direct investment at reasonable risk.

There is a view that the need to build a consortium with a multiplicity of partners has led on occasions to the consortia being non-optimised for the project, with a higher number of partners than may be technically necessary. Where this is true it must lead to unnecessary management overhead burdens that could have been reduced significantly if smaller, more tailored, consortia were used.

In many cases the ideal working relationship for technology research and subsequent exploitation is for the partnership to be composed simply of one industrial group and one academic group with a high degree of focus. This single company and university approach – as exemplified by University Technology Centres – is becoming increasingly popular with industry, academe and Government as a major part of any portfolio of research activities. To permit adequate funding and focus, it may be necessary for the industrial participant to be a large company. Resource allocation is always a difficult issue, but there may be some

occasions when developing such a two-partner project should be encouraged by support from LINK.

While it is appropriate that industry contributes significantly to the LINK scheme, SMEs often have limited resources and thus require the inclusion of a larger company in the consortium. It could be worthwhile examining what options there are to ensure that the required expertise and commitment is marshalled, without extending the number of participants unnecessarily.

Although universities (or rather their staff) are the prime repository of the scientific understanding that is to be best utilised, there are other sources of science that should be included and encouraged. It is possible that, for example, some Research and Technology Organisations can usefully supply that dimension in certain situations. Their expertise could be used more frequently if they were, when appropriate, considered to be the academic partner.

Progress is, rightly, scrutinised and an assessment made about whether to continue LINK funding. It is always hard to assess whether funding has been terminated too early, but there have been concerns that programmes have been terminated when they were about to bear fruit. This is a separate issue from whether LINK should support areas on a longer timescale – over several years – in particular areas where exploitation of new scientific developments may not be adequately achieved by short-term projects.

A deadline can usefully focus thinking, and annual calls have merit in allowing clearer comparison of projects; but they rarely optimise the timing for collaboration. It is worth considering whether the LINK scheme would be better based, in part or in total, on continuous calls. It could be useful for the Review to consider ways of simplifying the submission process.

You will no doubt be considering whether the interfaces between the LINK Scheme and the Faraday Partnerships are optimal.

I am sure that your study will assess, as rigorously as practicable, the benefits of the Scheme as it is currently operated. Success stories are likely to emerge. These form part of the evaluation and increase the perceived value of the Scheme, and thus its take-up and influence.

While there may be room for improvement in a number of areas, such as those noted, there is strong support for LINK from academe and industry.

Yours sincerely

John Enderby