UCL policy centre promises practical approach and 'friendly competition'

by Rebecca Hill rhnews@ResearchResearch.com

University College London's science policy department plans to be more applied than some of its competitors and work to understand and improve the practices of policy-making rather than criticise them.

Jason Blackstock, acting head of the science, engineering, technology and public policy department, told *Research Fortnight* that although he wanted to build connections with groups such as the Science Policy Research Unit at the University of Sussex, he expected "friendly competition" in some areas.

"We'll focus on policy challenges and problems and experiment with how to bring together scientists, policymakers and practitioners," he says, on the question of how his department will stand out from other science policy centres. "It's a very applied approach—as opposed to studying that interface."

The department, which will receive about £3 million each year from UCL for its first three years, as well as £3.5m from external funders for specific research programmes, will help UCL to challenge the established science policy departments at the Universities of Sussex and Manchester.

Blackstock adds that the department's location in central London will allow it access international researchers and policymakers, with another aim being to work with emerging economies that have an interest in improving their science advisory systems.

The department has been operational for nine months and has more than 30 staff members. Its research agenda includes understanding leadership in cities, carrying out longitudinal studies on energy, comparing the effectiveness of scientific advisory bodies, and science policy issues such as badger culls and renewable energy.

"We're also going to collect perspectives from scientists, scientific advisers and policymakers about where the skills gaps are," Blackstock says. "That will give us a better understanding of where miscommunications are and what training the next generation of scientists, policymakers and knowledge brokers need."

Part of the aim is to find ways for researchers to connect what they do; everyone has allocated time for departmental research. "The idea is not to steer individual projects, but to link them together," says Blackstock.

Meanwhile, the department is also on a recruitment drive as its programme of masters degrees in public administration starts in September.

Is science advice inherently politicised?

by Rebecca Hill at Circling the Square in Nottingham

Science and facts cannot be separated from policy-making and researchers' values always affect their work, a conference at the University of Nottingham heard last week.

The Circling the Square conference, organised by the university's Science, Technology and Society Research Priority Group, was held from 20 to 22 May.

Its aim was to question how to align research, politics, media and impact, but recurring themes were the divide between natural and social scientists and differences of opinion about how scientific evidence is interpreted in policy-making.

Speaking on the first day, Sheila Jasanoff, professor of science and technology studies at Harvard University, and Chris Tyler, director of the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, argued that scientific advice was an inherently politicised process.

"The idea that you can separate facts and policy is complete nonsense," Tyler said. "Yes, there are some cases where we think it's more X than Y, but the vast majority of science advice is not taking place in black and white."

However some audience members took umbrage at this idea. "My concern is this idea that all data is tainted and you can never disentangle scientific evidence from the values of that person. If so, that's deeply unsettling," said Philip Moriarty, a physicist at Nottingham.

Later, Tim Johnson, who studies the mathematics of finance at Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh, argued that providing scientific advice was "not about producing facts but about justifying the statements" that would influence policy.

Others argued that the government must ensure science remains independent of political influences. "Not only is the Haldane principle something you stick to, you have to demonstrate you're sticking to it with evidence," said Brian Collins, director of the centre for engineering policy at UCL. He added that he would like the research and higher education funding councils' definitions of impact to be better aligned, saying he was "optimistic" that this could happen as part of the government's longer-term science and innovation strategy.

Meanwhile, Jason Blackstock, acting head of University College London's science policy centre, called for the impact agenda to be redefined ahead of the next Research Excellence Framework, suggesting that it should shift its focus from economic growth to societal good.