

SCIENCE & INNOVATION NETWORK (SIN) – INNOVATION PROJECT QUESTIONNAIRE

1. What is your current interaction (if any) with FCO Science and Innovation Network (SIN) of Science and Technology attaches?

The Academy interacts with SIN S&T attaches in a limited number of countries for various purposes: for support when planning international missions, to obtain information regarding people or policy in the relevant country, and for advice or input when planning international activities. When visiting a country, the Academy will usually make contact with the S&T attaches located there in advance and will frequently meet up with them whilst in country. The main interactions to date have been with the attaches based in India, China and Japan. The Academy is also sometimes asked to present to S&T attaches as part of the briefing they receive on visits to London.

In addition, many Academy Fellows interact with S&T attaches when travelling on business or as part of academic delegations.

2. Is the innovation element of SIN's current remit "strengthen the UK's capacity to innovate through international research and development (R&D) investment, R&D partnerships and technology transfer" sufficiently robust?

The innovation element of the current remit seems heavily focussed on R&D. While this is clearly a vital part of the innovation chain, the Academy would argue that innovation is a far wider process, involving demonstration and deployment, as well as commercial exploitation. Moreover, innovation frequently involves incremental improvements in business processes and services – something not encapsulated at present by SIN's remit. Engineering is, of course, at the heart of these processes, focussing as it does on converting science and research to real-world applications. Reflecting this, the Fellowship of the Academy is drawn roughly 50/50 from the private sector and academia.

In general, Academy Fellows would value greater assistance from UK Government representatives overseas in advising on and making introductions to research/technology-based businesses, innovation agencies and potential investors (venture capital etc). However, if SIN is to take on a broader role, it will be important to clarify the division of responsibility between SIN and UKTI. It should also be stated that attaches in some countries (e.g. India) have already provided assistance of this nature, despite it being somewhat outside their remit.

3. How do you think the SIN could benefit you/your organisation in future?

SIN has already provided valuable support to the Academy and its Fellows – the attaches are considered to be of high-calibre and knowledgeable about the country they operate in. Further benefit could be gained if they were better placed to provide intelligence on, and more access to, knowledge-based businesses, venture capital and innovation agencies in key overseas markets.

SIN may also have a role in championing within Government the importance of such links. The Academy, for example, has been frustrated by the difficulty of gaining Government support for schemes to promote innovation exchanges between academic and industrial engineers (as opposed to just academics) in strategically important countries, despite this being an obvious opportunity to further some of Government's stated objectives. Moreover, in priority countries such as China and India, there is a strong and demonstrable demand for schemes of this nature.

4. What Innovation information do you receive from SIN?

Neither the Academy nor the Fellows who contributed towards this response have been recipients of specific information on innovation from SIN, except as a result of direct, personal requests or on the odd occasion that it is included in newsletters e.g. from the India branch of SIN.

5. Should SIN focus on particular aspects of innovation overall e.g links between business and research base or on specific aspects such as services or high technology and manufacturing sectors?

In order to differentiate the work of SIN from UKTI and make best use of limited resource, it would seem to make sense for SIN to focus on research-intensive and technology-based businesses. Facilitating links between the research base and these types of business would be an important element of the work but SIN also needs to support business to business links where science, technology or innovation play a significant role. Investing in activities that help the most innovative companies in the UK, most of which will be SMEs, to develop international partnerships and grow their international markets could be of significant value to the UK economy in the longer term.

6. Please add any additional comments not covered elsewhere in the questionnaire.

It is apparent from the comments submitted by Fellows that there is still a low awareness of the existence and role of the Network in some quarters (especially SMEs) and that there is also confusion over the relationship between SIN and the FCO. Certainly, the web presence of SIN could be improved, both in terms of the information presented on the FCO main website and the visibility on in-country websites. If investments are to be made in strengthening the innovation element of the SIN's work, this must be complemented by appropriate communications and stakeholder engagement activities in order for the full value to be realised.

The Academy is itself a member of a number of networks of relevance, both in the UK and internationally, and would be pleased to assist SIN, for example in the development of relationships with engineering entrepreneurs and innovative SMEs.

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