

## Punching above one's weight (1997-2007)

From its start-up in 1996, TRI's mission was "*To develop in Scotland a research institute renowned throughout Europe and the world for the quality and breadth of its work in transport and related issues*". This was both ambitious as a goal and flexible in its interpretation. It stemmed from John Mavor's<sup>1</sup> articulation of the need for the university to enable cross-faculty collaboration in research, and his use of the term 'pillar' conveyed a sense of adding strength to what departments or faculties could achieve on their own. The title of this presentation, 'Punching above one's weight', conveys a similar sense, and focuses on those issues that helped or hindered TRI's development as a research pillar.

By the end of January 1997 the university had in place what became the TRI Advisory Board and the TRI Main Board (which involved deans from all the faculties), both bodies chaired by the Chair of TRI, Professor Malcolm Buchanan. Redwood House (at 66 Spylaw Road) was designated as the 'TRI 'headquarters', an inspired choice, being almost equally distant from the three main campuses (Merchiston, Craiglockhart, Craighouse) and thus not seen as overly related to one particular faculty. By then too the university had submitted an application to the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC) for a Research Development Grant<sup>2</sup>. Entitled "*Extending research capability in transport research*", its main objective was to enable research leader appointments to be made in 'policy evaluation, economics, psychological and social aspects of transport'. Three new tenured posts were to be advertised, each providing an initial 3-year research commitment in TRI. Improvements in the facilities at Redwood House were also sought, to enable electrical re-wiring, refurbishment of seminar and staff rooms, the creation of two hot-desking research suites and the creation of a resource centre.

It soon became clear that the recruitment of research leaders was taking longer than had been anticipated<sup>3</sup>. As the reason for the SHEFC grant was to accelerate an extension in research capability, it was felt necessary to offset the effects of that delay by enabling the appointment of one part-time and two visiting professors<sup>4</sup>. An extension by one year of the end-date of the SHEFC grant was agreed.

Redwood House's role was to be the operational hub of TRI, with key posts of Development Manager and Information Officer (funding towards which was also sought in the SHEFC grant). Fortunately two existing members of research staff (Helen Condie and Barry Hutton) were able to take on TRI roles (as Development Manager and Planning Research Fellow respectively) early on. It was pleasing that one member of academic staff (Dr Julian Hine) sought and was granted permission to be based at Redwood for research purposes, and it was clear that much of the interaction with staff and research students would take time to develop in face to face meetings. In this respect the Director's PA (initially Robyn Chisholm) had an important role as TRI administrator, as did the TRI Information Officer (Joanne Sibbald) who developed and circulated Newsletters and managed the website.

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<sup>1</sup> John Mavor was Principal and Vice Chancellor of Napier University from 1994 to 2002

<sup>2</sup> The application is also described in Professor Dickinson's presentation at the 'Timeline event for the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of TRI

<sup>3</sup> In due course the research leader appointments were of Dr Stephen Stradling as *Reader in Behavioural aspects of Transport*, promoted later to a personal chair, with the title *Professor of Transport Psychology*; of Professor Austin Smyth as *Professor of Transport Economics*; and of Professor Margaret Grieco as *Professor of Transport and Society*

<sup>4</sup> Those appointed in this transitional phase were Professor Marcus Wigan (formerly Chief Scientist of the Australian Road Research Board) as a part-time (3 months per year) *Professor of Transport Systems*, initially for two years; Christiane Bielefeldt (formerly a project officer with the European Commission) as *Visiting Professor in Strategic Transport Management*; and James Wentworth (formerly a senior official in the USA Federal Highway Administration) as *Visiting Professor in Intelligent Transport Systems* with effect from May 1999 (and from January 2000 to June 2000 as part-time *Professor of Transport*).

Working in association with the university's research support office, the 'Hub team' adapted or developed procedures to help staff respond to project-funding opportunities and naturally there was a lot of interest in both providing and taking on board the feed-back obtained. Insights into what people thought of TRI's progress were obtained through 'Development days' and by inviting responses to such questions (typically posed by an Advisory Board member) as "What can the TRI do for you" and "What is the added value of TRI?"

One source of confusion was the existence of one or more 'subject interest' groups at departmental level. Clarity was needed on how these related to TRI. There were two different kinds of issue. The first issue became apparent early on when a research vacancy was advertised by a departmental group with no reference to TRI in the advert or supporting literature. To avoid that in future it was agreed (at a high level) that a departmental subject interest group should, for transparency, have 'TRI' added to the front of the departmental subject group name, with responsibility for the appropriate process taken by the TRI. Having settled the naming convention for departmental subject group names, the second issue was how they should relate to the names of TRI research themes that together set out the research areas that the TRI was engaging in. This was done by asking all TRI members to indicate which of the 13 or so subject interest groups they were interested in. By clustering like groups together, a smaller number of clusters was formed, representing TRI research 'themes', each with a named researcher as convener. The overall way in which renamed subject interest groups clustered under particular themes is shown in (SLIDE 1) and this both helped avoid confusion and aided awareness of TRI's cross-disciplinary approach and 'pillar' role. The TRI Management Group was reconstituted (ca June 2000), including representatives from each cluster, as well as representatives of the contract research staff, research students and support staff. Cross-faculty co-ordination in research student matters became facilitated by Professor Alison McCleery in the role of Postgraduate Research Tutor.

About the same time, Barry Hutton became Development Manager (Helen Condie having resigned that role to become a researcher on a EU project she had helped create, leaving behind a guide she had prepared on proposal preparation). It having been said that a 'well-oiled hub' was needed, he then produced a discussion paper on 'Structuring the TRI management information system' and after taking account of University 'One Economy' proposals and other's inputs, developed procedure that sought to respect both TRI and departmental/faculty goals in tracking costs and use of resources. Getting clarity in such matters was becoming increasingly important for the Hub Team.

Fostering collaboration. It was recognised in the SHEFC grant application that links needed to be made with staff and research students committed to transport teaching or research at other universities in Scotland. Initially these were invited to become Associate Members of TRI, and about a dozen did so, but this was later changed so that all those committed to transport teaching or research in a Scottish HEI be accorded the same title. These and other roles that then came into being are set out in (SLIDE2). Links with other organisations were also envisaged, for example, by a placement of staff with a local authority, or by collaborative accords. The first of these accords was with TRL Limited, whose Edinburgh office co-located with TRI at Redwood House from February 2001, and the second was with Queens University, Belfast (QUB) by developing the Transport Research Institute (Northern Ireland Centre) (TRI-NIC).

In these ways TRI became not only cross-disciplinary in its approach to research but also cross-institutional, thereby encouraging synergy. A Garden Party marked the signing of Memoranda of Understanding of these two accords. Soon after that we celebrated our 5<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, and a few days later learned that TRI had achieved a '4' rating in the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise, which meant we had demonstrated "*Quality that equates to attainable levels of national excellence in virtually all of the research activity submitted, showing some evidence of international quality*". A great step forward: we were beginning to punch above our weight.

Howard R Kirby