

# **Isaac Newton Trust**

## **Review**

## 1. **Introduction and background to the present inquiry**

The Isaac Newton Trust was established by Trinity in 1988 ‘...with the object of promoting assisting and furthering education learning and research in the University’. The workings of the Trust were reviewed in 1995 by a committee chaired by Sir Rex Richards. That committee concluded that ‘There can be no doubt that the Trust has made a most significant contribution to the academic work of the University and of the colleges’ and made a number of recommendations. These were considered fully by the Trustees at their meeting on 6 July 1995. Recognising that some of the recommendations have been overtaken by events, the remainder appear to have been substantially implemented as confirmed to us by the Director.

The present review committee was established by the College in spring 2007. It was made clear that the decision to establish the inquiry did not arise from any particular concern about the operation of the Trust but to confirm the good stewardship of the funds furnished by the College. For that reason, unless the committee found reason to do otherwise, the report of the present inquiry was expected to be rather less detailed than that of Richards. The committee has not found reason to do otherwise and our overall conclusion is identical to that of Richards quoted above.

After an initial meeting between the Chairman and Secretary of the Inquiry with the Director and Treasurer of the Trust to determine what background material might be needed, the committee met formally on three occasions, and once informally with a number of the Trustees. Written views were solicited from University Heads of Department, Heads of Houses and a number of individuals. Twenty-four written submissions were received. It is appropriate to put on record the gratitude of the Committee to Professor Rallison, Director of the Trust, for the very substantial volume of material he provided and to note that a number of those making written submissions to us went out of their way to commend his helpfulness and efficiency.

We begin this report with some comments on the major current initiatives of the Trust, briefly discuss Administration and Communications and conclude with a discussion of Funding and Strategy.

We have marked by bold type those of our observations to which we would particularly draw attention.

## 2. **Major initiatives**

### ***Undergraduate Bursaries***

Feedback from across the University has been, without exception, extremely positive with respect to the role that the Trust plays in running the University’s undergraduate bursary scheme. The Trust administers the overall scheme which in 2006-7 awarded approximately 1750 bursaries with a value of £2.2 million. At steady state this will rise to approximately £6.5 million as “variable” fees are phased in. There has been some anxiety concerning how

long the Trust will be willing to administer the scheme, given that the funds under administration are increasingly coming from non-Trust sources. On this score, the Director reports that administration is not an excessive burden on the Trust given the current bursary policies. Moreover, should this situation change, the Director has made clear that the Trust is happy to provide a three year notice period for the cessation of the Trust administering undergraduate bursaries.

This scheme is an unqualified success and one that is deeply appreciated across the University.

### ***Research Student Fund***

The evidence with respect to the funding of research students by the Trust is also very positive. The Trust makes an annual contribution (currently £90,000) to the University's Domestic Research Studentship Competition which provides full funding for UK students and fees only for EU students. It is clear that the Trust has engaged with the Board of Graduate Studies to ensure that the Trust's funding is consistent with University policy and to provide imaginative schemes such as the underwriting of early offers of funding to applicants.

The policy for the funding of graduate students is under review by the University and will no doubt develop over the next few years. The collaboration between the Trust and the Board of Graduate Studies seen by the Committee gives strong assurance that the Trust's activities in this regard will be consistent with, indeed will contribute to, University policy.

### ***Fixed Term Teaching Fellowships***

The Fixed Term Teaching Fellowships are clearly valuable for both the postdoctoral fellows who are appointed and the poorer colleges who are eligible to participate. The scheme obviously cannot on its own solve the problem of the large number of postdoctoral researchers who desire a college attachment but have none. But it does make a significant contribution and is a model that richer colleges might adopt as their own contribution towards addressing the problem of postdoctoral researchers. The extra teaching provided for the eligible colleges is important. Poorer colleges at the moment are liable to lose out in the increasingly costly competition to secure the services of newly appointed University Teaching Officers. But they then have to draw on already stretched resources to appoint College Teaching Officers to ensure good undergraduate teaching. The Committee considers that Fixed Term Teaching Fellowships are a notably worthwhile contribution by the Trust.

### ***College Teaching Officers***

The College Teaching Officer Scheme provides essential extra teaching for those Faculties and Departments which participate. The Newton Trust Lectureships also offer much-appreciated recognition to College Teaching

Officers, many of whom feel under-valued and taken for granted by their Faculties. It is clear that it is the Faculties that benefit most from these schemes. The College Teaching Officer is expected to make a substantial contribution to the Faculty's teaching, especially when compared, pro rata, with the contractual obligations of University Teaching Officers. It is not clear that the additional resource paid to the Colleges fully compensates for the loss of teaching and administration by the CTO in whom the College will have invested heavily.

The problem of College Teaching Officers is a long-standing one but has a greater visibility at the moment. The University is concerned at the large amount of core teaching and examination that is provided in some Faculties by staff who are not employees of the University. The Colleges and the CTOs are concerned about the lack of career progression for CTOs. The comfortable notion that good CTOs would automatically land Faculty appointments or jobs outside Cambridge no longer holds good. The Committee recognizes the Director is in close touch with the groups in the University and the Colleges considering these problems. It believes that the Trust may be able to play a crucial role in assisting the University and the Colleges to make progress in this important, but politically charged, area. We note that the University is already considering the problem of roles and career paths for CTOs.

### *Research grants*

There is general and enthusiastic support for this part of the Trusts work, and the Director and Trustees apply great expertise in responding quickly and effectively to a substantial number of applications. The smooth highly responsive nature of the operation is widely valued.

There is a clear intention on the part of the Trustees that the quality of projects supported by the trust should be at least of the standard expected by external funding bodies such as Research Councils and the major charities, and that the projects should be ones that for special reasons might not attract timely or adequate funding from other sources. **We endorse this policy and emphasise that it would be very damaging for the reputation of the University if the Trust were in any way seen as a soft touch.** In practice, the projects supported by the Trustees appear to fall broadly under four heads:

- New initiatives – young researchers without a track record; researchers returning after a career break; seed funding for entirely novel projects
- Interdisciplinary research which tends to be poorly served by rigidly discipline-oriented grants committees.
- Unanticipated urgent opportunities to which conventional funding sources could not respond in time
- Underwriting posts and other costs for short periods while responses from other sources were awaited.

We applaud this approach but note that the distribution of grants between faculties is somewhat uneven, notably, as discussed in the following section, between the sciences and the humanities. Overall the lion's share of the

funding goes to the experimental subjects. It is clear, however, that the Trust would welcome an increase in high quality applications in the Humanities which could in the longer term enable additional external funding to be won. Even within the sciences it appears that some departments do rather better than others. As far as we can tell this simply reflects the pattern of applications and the fact that the Trust is better known in some parts of the University than in others. This could be remedied to some extent by making the work of the Trust better known within the University as suggested later.

About two-thirds of applications to the Trust are successful in whole or in part. This is a high award rate in comparison to external agencies. But it seems to be explained in part through the prior discussions between potential applicants and the Trust's Director that mean that fewer inappropriate applications are submitted than is usual outside. Another reason is the wider scope of INT awards. In particular, a very high success rate is to be expected for applications for bridging funds for brief intervals between the termination of one external research grant and the beginning of another. While the number of applications has increased over recent years the Trustees feel that the quality has been maintained. They also gave us to understand that the funding is sufficient to meet the present demand and that the funding level for grants has been about right.

We also observe that because Trust funding does not attract QR (overheads) funding from the Funding Council, it is desirable that it should be used as far as possible to seed projects that will do so in the future. For this same reason we would expect it to be unusual for this kind of project to be the subject of repeat applications. In other situations, repeat applications are to be expected. For example, only established University Officers may apply to the Trust and for that reason it is not uncommon for relatively senior people, such as Department Heads, to make requests to support the work of young staff who are not in university posts and thus unable to apply in their own names.

Evidently the success of the research grants scheme depends crucially on the expertise of the Director and Trustees. Understandably in view of the priority given to rapid decision making, the peer-reviewing process is often local and less exhaustive than for external agencies, and while the Director does return to applicants with queries, there is no routine opportunity for applicants to respond to referees comments. Significant expansion might put this format under strain. Assessment of grant applications appears to be a significant part of the Trustees' work load and it is for consideration that the preliminary assessment might usefully be carried out in sub-committees of subject groupings.

The requirement for matching funds is felt to be important by the Trustees both as further evidence of perceived quality, and as an additional source of funds. However, not all matching funds necessarily qualify for QR support from the Funding Council and, depending on their source, may not be a reliable guide to quality. We note that matching funds may be much more difficult to obtain in Humanities subjects. Overall we were satisfied that the

matching funds criteria were applied flexibly and sensibly and where appropriate were relaxed.

We can see that the present form of published wording about applications for the Trust Grants scheme, leaves the Trustees with maximum discretion, **it is for consideration whether the words might usefully contain a more explicit description of the kinds of application that are particularly encouraged.** This could be done without limiting the freedom of the Trustees act in other ways. For example, it could be made clear that applications for seed money to help junior staff, established or not, at the start of their research careers were particularly welcome. It might also be more explicit in indicating that Trustees would not normally consider applications from well established staff that fell clearly within the remit of other funding bodies.

In conclusion it is clear this aspect of the Trust's work is highly valued and highly regarded within the University. However, we feel that for the time being it is adequately funded and that other parts of the Trust's work should have a higher priority for any additional funding. It is important that the Trust continues to focus on fostering new ideas and work that will bring additional intellectual benefit. This short-term pump-priming activity is key.

### ***Research grants in the Humanities***

Concerns have been expressed to the Committee that the Research Grants scheme seems disproportionately to benefit the sciences at the expense of the Humanities and Social Sciences, especially the Arts subjects. It is argued that the current system inevitably favours collaborative research projects and team projects employing postdoctoral researchers. Grants require matching funds, or the prospect of matching funds, although this requirement can be waived. The Research Grants scheme, it is argued, does not meet the needs of researchers in the Humanities where single scholars need, above all, time to do their own research, rather than research associates or equipment. In one sense this is true because the criteria for exceptional need listed above are likely to be satisfied less frequently in the Humanities than in laboratory and team based disciplines which are much more sensitive to the decisions of external agencies. That said, the proportion of research funds awarded to the Humanities by the Trust is certainly no less than the Humanities proportion of the University's Research Council grant funding. But it is perhaps noticeable that there were no awards in either History or English over several years. Large grants in the humanities tend to have been for editorial projects or the creation of databases.

The Research Grant scheme can scarcely be blamed for the failure of scholars in the humanities and social sciences to apply. The University has tried to tackle the problem of a 'culture' in the humanities of not applying for major grants. There is evidence of a culture change beginning to take place. The research leave 'top up' scheme of the AHRC is now one in which Cambridge academics are very successful. There is now an Arts and Humanities Research Council and it would seem reasonable not to expect 'special' treatment for scholars in the Humanities as far as matching funds requirements are

concerned. But there may be scope for the Newton Trust to encourage that culture change further. For example, few scholars in the Humanities have access to the sort of low level research assistance that is provided on a routine basis for Humanities professors in the United States and it is not the sort of help that is envisaged in Research Council grants. Indeed, the Research Grants scheme of the AHRC specifically states that ‘The scheme is not intended to support individual scholarship’. **The Committee recommends that the Trust consult with the schools of Arts and Humanities and Humanities and Social Sciences to see if there might be ways in which the Trust, at a relatively low cost, could further assist research in the Humanities and Social Sciences.**

3. **Administration**

The Trust is exceptionally well run. **It is very rare to find an organisation of this kind that has an external clientele that is so uniformly appreciative and complimentary.** This is entirely due to the efficiency, flexibility and approachability of the present Director. He plays a pivotal role in running the Trust. He appears accessible to potential beneficiaries and clearly gives advice that ensures an optimal level of successful applications and helps others avoid wasting time by submitting inappropriate submissions. The fact that he is not a full time administrator but an active and distinguished researcher, not only gives him credibility within the university but also means that the university research community can be confident that their problems are fully understood.

**The present Director’s term (nine years) will terminate in 2009 and the reappointment or succession will be a significant issue for the Trust.** The Trustees will be aware that this is a matter for urgent consideration because if for any reason it was necessary to seek a new Director, it would be highly desirable for that person to work along side Professor Rallison for a period, just as he (Rallison) did with his predecessor.

The cost to expenditure ratio for the Trust is very low and has been running at or below 3%. This is highly commendable but does not represent the full cost. **Significant administrative overheads are absorbed by Trinity and not charged to the Trust. It would be more usual today for these costs to identified and included in the accounts and consideration should be given to doing this.** At present this is of relatively little importance but it might become so if it were ever necessary to locate a Director outside the College.

4. **Communications strategy**

The Trust has a very effective website ([www.Newtontrust.cam.ac.uk](http://www.Newtontrust.cam.ac.uk)) and it produces a comprehensive annual report.

Nevertheless the Trust does not publicise its efforts and achievements beyond a narrow audience. **It could be useful for the Trust to publish within the University a list of successful grants after each of the allocation meetings**

**of the Trust.** This publication might be via the web-site and departments etc. alerted to its publication by email.

Such publicity could be beneficial in attracting more high quality applications for funds from a wider range of faculties and departments.

5. **Funding**

The Trust is dependent on Trinity College for the vast bulk of its funding, although it has attracted some significant donations and Trinity alumni have started to make donations directly to the Trust as part of the 800<sup>th</sup> Appeal.

The Trust has also been able to take advantage of the performance of its endowment to allow expenditure to exceed donations and investment income by £2.1m in the 5 years to 31<sup>st</sup> January 2006. The Trust does not have a policy of building its endowment but rather to maintain sufficient reserves to fund its activities for up to five years. The donations from Trinity College stayed stable at £2m per year for 11 years from 1996 to 2006 and have been increased to £2.5m for 2007 and 2008. This is a temporary increase pending the result of this review. During the same period HEPPI increased 37.9% and RPI was up 32.8%. **We believe that the widely acknowledged and continued success of the Trust's programs would justify the College in at least consolidating the temporary increase into the baseline annual donation and, if funds allowed, adjusting the annual donation for inflation to about £2.75m.**

6. **Strategy**

The Trust is fortunate to be able to call on an extraordinary wealth of experience and expertise among its Trustees. The Trustees normally meet three times a year when the main business of the meetings is the assessment of applications for research grants. However, the Chairman commented to us that regular meetings tended to be dominated by research grants with other less pressing matters left to the last hour of a four or five hour meeting. We feel that this is a pity because it may mean that the Trustees have insufficient opportunity to reflect on broader questions of Trust strategy. We do not wish to suggest that the present strategy is inappropriate – indeed there is every indication that it has been outstandingly successful. But circumstances change and the Trust's priorities may need to do so as well.

Going forward it seems to us that three questions arise. The firsts relates to how the Trust should best handle major projects. Such projects (e.g. Newton Institute and CRASSH) can be extremely important to the University but may require the commitment of large sums over a relatively short period. **It is for discussion whether the Trust should have a policy of building up a reserve so that it was possible to respond in a timely way to needs of this kind or whether they should be handled in some other way.** It seems to us that having at least some reserve would allow the Trust to give a guarantee relatively quickly to an important new initiative without jeopardizing the



future of its mainstream continuing programs. This should be a matter for discussion with the College (see below).

The second relates to external fund raising. There has been some suggestion that it would be desirable for the Trust to raise funds externally to augment those that come directly from the College. As noted above, one of the options open to those invited to support the College's 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary appeal is to support the Trust; and that contributions have come from this and several other sources. This is clearly helpful and is to be encouraged. The present Trustees, however, are not a fundraising committee and if it was decided that there should be significant external fund raising outside the 'Trinity and University family' there would be major implications for the structure of the Trust that would need careful consideration both by Trinity and the Trustees. **While donations to the Trust from other sources should be welcomed, we would not advise that the Trust in its present form should embark on a proactive fundraising campaign.**

The third question relates to the longer term scope of the Trust's activities. As Sir John Bradfield forcefully emphasised in his letter to us, universities in the UK face massive challenges in maintaining competitive international quality. The Newton Trust represents a far-sighted philanthropic initiative on the part of Trinity to offer Cambridge an edge in this competition. In the overall context of Cambridge funding the annual sums allocated by the Trust are small but they have an importance quite out of proportion to their amount. This is because they allow the University to move with a degree of nimbleness and opportunism that is simply not feasible with funds from conventional sources.

At present the role of the Trustees is largely reactive. It would be desirable to have some mechanism by which they were informally made aware of the University's plans and the mind of the College so that the Trust could plan accordingly. We recognise that at present the both the Vice-Chancellor and the Master are Trustees. However, as Trustees who have a responsibility for making judgements on the Trust's priorities, it would not be appropriate for them to be the interested advocate of particular University proposals or College policies. In our meeting with the Trustees we detected an uncertainty about the longer term ambitions of the College for the Trust and perhaps a hesitancy to inquire.

**The Trustees may wish to consider holding an 'away-day' meeting each year at which the only business is a review of present programmes, the balance of resources between them, their likely/desirable duration and a consideration of strategy for the future.** The earlier part of such a meeting could usefully comprise an informal discussion with senior representatives of the University over aspirations and the means of accomplishing them. Separately or on the same occasion there would be real advantage in the Trustees also meeting representatives of the College so that the Governing Body could take advantage of the Trust's insight into prospective funding opportunities within the University. The Trust, if it so wished, could present a strong case for increased funding.

7. **Conclusions**

Our overall conclusion is that the Trust continues to be an outstanding success; that it brings great benefit to the University and plays a significant part in keeping Cambridge in the top group of world universities.

We have made certain detailed comments in the body of this report but we believe that the College could reasonably increase its annual donation to the Trust in line with inflation in the firm knowledge that it would be prudently and effectively deployed to the advantage of the University.

We believe that although things have worked out well so far, it would be prudent for the Trustees to maintain a regular and informal dialogue both with representatives of the College and of the University to inform the strategic planning of all parties.