

Nurse Review of Research Councils: Call for Evidence

Response Form

Please state whether you are responding as an individual, or on behalf of an organisation:

Organisation.

Please write here your name/ the name of your organisation and contact details. This would help us to contact you if we have further questions.

Arts & Humanities in Society Working Group of the Royal Society of Edinburgh's Young Academy of Scotland (YAS).

Contacts: Professor Faye Hammill (faye.hammill@strath.ac.uk) or Dr Mirko Canevaro (mirko.canevaro@ed.ac.uk)

Note: The Royal Society of Edinburgh and Young Academy of Scotland have jointly submitted a response to the Nurse review. This is a supplementary, and more specific, response, providing the perspective of arts & humanities researchers within YAS.

Please provide evidence and views in relation to the following themes:

1. Strategic decision-making

How should the RCs take account of wider national interests including regional balance and the local and national economic impact of applied research?

As researchers working in Scotland, we are particularly interested in this question. If we reason in terms of Scotland and England, then we can say that Scottish academics do proportionately very well in terms of RC funding. But if we think in terms of the various regions of the UK, then we see an extremely large share of the funding going to institutions in the south-east of England, leaving very restricted amounts for all other regions. Of course, this is not necessarily wrong in itself: the south east has more people, more universities, more industry etc. But 'regional balance' is something which is seen to be in the 'national interest', not only in the Triennial Review document but according to all political parties. Therefore, we find it very worrying that research funding, instead of being an instrument used to 'decentralise' intellectual energies, and contribute to the development and catching-up of various areas of Britain, instead just reinforces the dominance of the golden triangle. If we think in terms of PG students (although the Nurse Review and Triennial Review documents make little mention of them), then for example, Oxford alone got 71 PhD studentships out of the latest allocations from the AHRC doctoral training programme, Cambridge 63, and the whole of Scotland 41. This is not just a Scottish issue. It is an even more serious concern for areas such as the north east of England.

Within each RC is the balance of funding well-judged between support of individual investigators, support of teams and support of infrastructure?

In the AHRC and ESRC, there is still a strong emphasis on support of individual researchers, particularly – though not exclusively – via fellowships. This kind of support is cherished by the research community, and is essential on many levels. In terms of project grants, though, there has been a clear move away from smaller-scale initiatives, which might involve only a couple of people, towards very large projects. This clearly disadvantages cutting-edge or risky research, and prioritises safe projects. A new complete edition of a canonical author, of whose works there are already many fine editions, can attract £1 million. That could have been used to fund four medium-sized projects, employing one or two RAs or technicians, pursuing some really novel themes & methods, and giving early or mid-career scholars the experience of acting as PI. Our Working Group endorses the comment, in the Triennial Review (p54):

"There was evidence that differing approaches to funding mechanisms between the Research Councils was having different effects on career development opportunities and diversity of research groups receiving support in the different disciplines. An example of this would be moves by some of the Research Councils away from small, specialised grants towards funding of much larger projects. There is a question about whether this may be having a disproportionate effect on early career researchers, who may not be in a position to lead a large operation, and certain disciplines where research costs are low. ...there would be merit in the RCs sharing best practice in policy development with relation to development of a sustainable research base."

Another way in which teams are supported is via network grants. These are extremely valuable, though one problem is that there is no mechanism (in these, or indeed in any schemes) for follow-on funding for research (as opposed to KE). Other national or charitable funders (e.g. the Mellon Foundation in the US and SSHRC in Canada) do offer continuation grants, to enable successful projects to be extended and taken in new directions. In this way, they build longer-term relationships with the groups and individuals in whom they have invested.

Is the balance between investigator-led and strategically focused funding appropriate, and do the right mechanisms exist for making strategic choices?

Although strategic initiative are most commonly funded through a restricted number of large awards, we welcome the ways in which the RCs have enabled smaller bids on strategic themes (e.g. through scoping awards). We also commend their efforts to limit time being spent on unsuccessful bids (e.g. by two-stage outline and full bid processes, which we'd like to see being used more widely). It is of course crucial that themes are not imposed by the government but generated by the research community, based on researchers' insights into which areas are thriving and showing strong potential.

One of our concerns about strategic initiative relates to ECRs. PhD graduates often feel they must adapt the direction of their subsequent research to one of a limited number of topics that are funded, and therefore offer post-doctoral positions. The result is that the research agenda of ECRs is defined by more senior colleagues, and opportunities for blue-skies thinking are restricted. Moreover, in the humanities, postdoc experience is not yet highly valued by search committees, and candidates who have established their own research agenda, by acting as PI on a small grant rather than as postdoc on someone else's project, are likely to be favoured. More generally, the increase in postdoctoral positions, resulting from the move towards larger grants, is in some ways good for PhD graduates. Yet these positions do not always translate into lecturing positions (partly because of the low rate of vacancies and partly because RAs rarely have time to turn their thesis into a book). They might therefore be seen as contributing to the casualisation of the academic workplace.

2. Collaborations and partnerships

How can the RCs catalyse collaboration between institutions?

The RCs are effective in catalysing collaboration among UK institutions (e.g. through the doctoral training centres/consortia), and between HEIs and non-HEI partners (e.g. through CASE/CDA awards & impact/KE awards). The RCs offer much more limited opportunities for collaboration with overseas institutions, although the introduction of the possibility of international co-investigators is very welcome. We note, too, that while most institutions are expected to collaborate in order to win funding (e.g. for DTCs), Oxford & Cambridge often do not have to. This reduces opportunities for those outside those universities to collaborate with those inside, and creates a system of exceptionalism which undermines the stated rules and priorities of the research councils.

Do they adequately support interdisciplinary research?

On p96 of the Triennial Review there is the recommendation:

"serious consideration should be given to a time limited trial of an intervention specifically aimed at eliciting more interdisciplinary research, such as a challenge fund dedicated solely to responsive mode interdisciplinary projects."

We are doubtful about this. The problem is not that there isn't enough interdisciplinary research going on; rather, it is that when you do have an interdisciplinary project, it isn't clear whether, or how, it can be funded. What we need is clear processes allowing a project or network bid to request funding from two RCs. A time-limited call could distort emerging research by forcing researchers to rely on interdisciplinary links that are not fully developed or properly integral to their project's design.

3. Balance of funding portfolio

Are the divisions of scientific subject areas between the research councils appropriate?

Whilst we would certainly not claim that the arts and science are fundamentally unlike in their ways of pursuing knowledge, different subject areas do have different practical requirements. The current model of separate, highly expert RCs is by far the best way of responding to those differing needs. In the subject areas covered by the AHRC, one distinctive aspect is the inclusion of *arts* as well as humanities (implying a need to fund practice-based research); another is the importance of smaller grants. In the humanities, and social sciences, a lot can be achieved with a modest injection of funds, and the AHRC/ESRC's historic emphasis on fellowships, networks and other lower-value awards is absolutely crucial to the development of new lines of enquiry and to the nurturing of early-career researchers. These priorities would probably not be retained by a non-specialist research council (as we see in the example of the European Research Council). For these, among other reasons, we are extremely keen to retain research councils dedicated to the arts and humanities, and to economic and social research.

Is the balance of funding between different Research Councils optimal?

As the ESRC and AHRC represent 50% of UK researchers, we certainly hope that their current modest share of the total budget (9.4% between them) will not be reduced.

What are the gaps or holes in the funded portfolios of the research councils?

Above all, funding for Masters students. This is a particular problem in arts, humanities & social science, because in STEM subjects, M-level degrees are often integrated into either undergraduate or PhD programmes, which means students are not left with an unfunded year in between. The RCs' withdrawal of funding from masters programmes, combined with the increasingly widespread expectation that new PhD students should

have done a Masters, means that we are at serious risk of undermining our national research base, by limiting access to postgraduate study by socio-economic background rather than intellectual merit.

Also, project continuation funding, to allow new lines of enquiry to be pursued and KE opportunities to be taken up. Funds to organise workshops or conferences (these have also disappeared from the portfolios of other, non-RC, funders recently).

4. Effective ways of working

Views are invited on how the Research Councils can operate most effectively within the wider science and innovation system, recognising what works well and identifying opportunities for improvements. You may wish to consider issues such as the strategic leadership provided by the Research Councils, how Research Councils engage with their communities, and the operation of the peer review system.

We think that the AHRC and ESRC are perceived as highly expert bodies, and have generated a good deal of trust among researchers. Their prestige, and established reputations, are important, and mean that the views of leading figures at these RCs are respected and listened to. In turn, the RC staff engage extensively with the research community, subject associations etc, and over a number of years, it is possible for researchers to build a strong individual relationship with a particular RC.

On operational matters: the shift towards funding fewer, larger projects, together with the shift towards DTCs rather than individual PhD awards, is widely understood to be a function of the RCs' desire to save admin costs by administering fewer grants. But, as the Triennial Review points out, admin costs represent only 4% of RCUK's total budget, and this compares favourably with the situation in other countries. It is difficult to understand why there is a need to reduce these costs further, especially when the effects can be damaging.

Effects of the move towards larger grants include the lowered success rate (waste of applicants' time), the prioritising of senior above early-career researchers, the prioritising of traditional over novel research, and the further concentration of funding in a few privileged institutions. The move toward allocating doctoral students via a DTC has saved the RCs work but generated an enormous amount for universities. The initial set-up of complex new systems has been very time-consuming, and the total administrative burden has likely increased, as a result of students applying to multiple DTCs. Another area in which the RCs' efforts to reduce admin costs have been damaging is peer review: some aspect of this system seem to have become eroded. For some schemes, e.g. AHRC Collaborative Doctoral Awards, & some of the targeted calls, no peer review happens since assessment is by committee, & therefore no feedback is provided to applicants. Feedback is highly valued, and essential to career development and to the refining of our intellectual and strategic approaches.

5. Any other comments?

On the impact agenda: the ESRC has perhaps been more successful than the AHRC in enunciating what 'impact' means in its subject areas. Recent efforts from within and outside the RCs to argue for the public value of the humanities, and the importance of increasing civic and cultural capital (not just financial capital) are welcome, and we would like to see more leadership and guidance, from the AHRC especially, in this area.

The closing date for responses to this call for evidence is **Friday 17 April 2015 at 23:45**.

Please provide your response in Microsoft Word format. In order to be considered, submissions should be no longer than 3000 words.

Please email or post the completed response form to:

Email: nursereview@bis.gsi.gov.uk

Postal Address:

Nurse Review Secretariat

Research Councils Unit

5/ Victoria 1

Department for Business, Innovations and Skills

1 Victoria Street

London SW1H 0ET

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BIS/15/126RF