

Universities Scotland response to SFC consultation on Research Excellence Grant and Research Postgraduate Grant Consultation

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Research Excellence Grant proposals
<p>Volume</p> <p>As the two major drivers of REG distribution, the SFC proposes that a fixed proportion of the REG be allocated on the basis of 'Quality and Volume' (with appropriate subject weights). Do you agree that this approach supports the principles of the grant? The SFC would welcome views on alternative approaches where there are clear linkages to delivering the purpose of the grant.</p> <p>Universities Scotland supports uncoupling the funding provided to support non-charity research/charity income from that provided in recognition of research volume and quality. The proposal to distribute a fixed proportion of REG on the basis of 'quality and volume' is both sensible and in line with the rest of the UK.</p> <p>It is important that this is based on the overall REF scores, rather than any disaggregation of them; such a disaggregation would only add further volatility to REG funding.</p> <p>However, before moving forward with implementation it will be necessary to consider the implications of a specific proposal. An indication of how funding will be split between the three proposed components of REG, and the principles underpinning this split, are essential before a definitive view can be taken. This would be entirely consistent with SFC's desire to make REG more transparent.</p> <p>Any shift in the pattern of funding should include an initial safety net and a transition period; this is especially important for institutions with a smaller volume of research. We are concerned that wider restrictions on funding may limit SFC's scope for such transitional funding.</p>

We welcome SFC's minimalist approach to changing the subject weightings for REG and RPG, but would urge them to pay particular attention to any discrepancies with HEFCE weightings, and to the effects on funding of those institutions submitting to a narrow range of UoAs under the REF. In particular, where SFC weightings are less than HEFCE weightings, this could put those Scottish UoAs at a distinct disadvantage relative to English ones.

Other Activity Indicators: Research Assistants and Research Students

The SFC proposes to not include the other activity indicators 'research assistants' and 'research students' in the revised model. The SFC would welcome views on the potential impact of this approach on delivering the aims of the grant and on individual disciplines.

Universities Scotland agrees with the SFC proposal to remove the number of research assistants and research students from the REG formula. At the sector level, these numbers are correlated with grant income, which comes with either overheads (in the case of research income) or uplift (in the case of funding from charities). They also already contribute indirectly to REG funding through the Environment component of REF. We see no reason to measure these numbers separately in the REG calculation.

However, Other Activity Indicators are a useful mechanism to allow research funding to follow changes in research activity between RAE or REF exercises, and this sensitivity may be diminished by the removal of RA and PGR numbers from the REG formula. Thus the proportion of REG determined by competitively won research income (i.e. REGb) must be sufficiently large to provide a proxy for shifting patterns of research as the REF results become increasingly dated post-2015/16. Furthermore, the current OAI are an indication of research-efficiency – i.e., the size of research groups (RAs and PGRs) and the size of the grants supporting their group's research, relative to the number of research –active staff.

In addition, the RPG funding stream already provides funding with respect to numbers of research students, so removing this element avoids the duplication of two different streams of funding rewarding the same volume indicator. However, this makes it all the more important that levels of RPG funding are maintained to support this valuable component of current and especially future research capacity.

Other Activity Indicators: Research income and charity income

The SFC proposes to adopt a revised approach for supporting research income and charity research income in the REG model. Should SFC support research income and charitable research income in the way proposed? Is it essential that the model supports charitable research income?

Universities Scotland supports the SFC proposal to revise the REG model such that research income and charity funding are uplifted based purely upon the volume of this funding. This approach provides a fair means to meet the shortfall caused by the 80% contribution to FEC offered by RCUK – more sustainable than the current system, which weights this volume by REF outcome.

The new model will also ensure that the funding is allocated in a transparent way, thus allowing it to be used directly to support the full costs of charity-funded research activity. In this way, the proposed revisions align more closely with the additional support distributed by HEFCE to HEIs in England, which is in direct proportion to the income that institutions receive from charities.

The proposed approach to charity uplift specifically will match the ethos adopted by RCUK, which funds indirect/overheads solely in proportion to eligible costs on the awarded grant.

It is crucial that the model supports charitable research income. Charities play a significant role in funding research both in Scotland and the UK; charities fund 16% of the research in Scottish HEIs (compared to 15% in the UK as a whole). Scotland attracts a greater spend of charity research (16% funding compared to population (8%) than do other parts of the UK.

Charity funding makes a key contribution to research in Scotland and so must be fully supported. Charities themselves emphasise the importance of support funding by government to allow them to fund only the direct cost of research.

By bringing the Scottish research landscape into harmony with that of the wider UK, the SFC proposal would reinforce a general desire for Scotland to perform at an excellent level within an extended research environment.

Once again, we would welcome modelling of these proposed changes, taking especial note of any unintended consequences in the funding of different disciplines, especially in the Arts and Humanities.

Research Postgraduate Grant

The SFC proposes to not make changes to the current approach to distributing the RPG. Are you content with this approach? Should a quality factor be applied when calculating the RPG allocation? Is £73k a sufficient minimum amount for the smaller institutions to invest in their research training environment and to develop their student base?

We do not believe there is a compelling reason to alter the approach for calculating the RPG.

Our smaller institutions would welcome an increase in the £73k baseline funding for RPG. To put this in context, annual membership costs of cross-institutional bodies such as the Scottish Graduate School for the Arts and Humanities may be a flat fee of, say, £10k for any size of institution; a very significant proportion of the current baseline RPG.

Additional Comments

Careful modeling of the relative sizes of the REGa, REGb and REGc allocations is essential to ensure that due recognition is made of efficient research units sustaining high quality Scottish research, and to assess the impact of the proposed changes on the funding allocation to institutions if Research Assistant and PGR data are no longer used.