

CONSULTATION RESPONSE

SFC consultation: Research Excellence Grant (REG) and Research Postgraduate Grant (RPG)

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The Scottish Funding Council have opened a consultation on how funding is allocated through the Research Excellence Grant (REG) in anticipation of the REF2021 results, which are due to come out in May 2022. The last time this funding stream was reviewed was back in 2014. There are also questions within the consultation that relate to the Research Postgraduate Grant (RPG).

QUESTION 1: IF IT WERE NECESSARY, WHAT WOULD BE THE IMPLICATIONS OF DELAYING IMPLEMENTATION OF REF 2021 RESULTS AND CHANGES TO REG UNTIL AY 2023-24?

MillionPlus accepts that some delay to the implementation may be inevitable and that it would be impractical to oppose any sort of delay whatsoever. But there are problems associated with a delay, and in order to minimise these, MillionPlus believes that the SFC should aim to guarantee that the delay will be limited to one year. Delaying beyond this point would mean that the 2014 results would be around a decade old, which is undesirable. The key question, therefore, is not should there be a delay but rather how can the SFC ensure that the delay is limited to one year? Furthermore, how can this delay be managed and planned effectively to reduce disruption or negative impact for Scottish institutions?

QUESTION 2: SHOULD SFC SEEK TO LIMIT DOWNWARD CHANGES IN REG EXPERIENCED BY INDIVIDUAL UNIVERSITIES POST REF2021 AND, IF SO, WHAT SHOULD BE THE SCOPE OF ANY ADJUSTMENTS MADE?

MillionPlus believes that it is sensible to take steps to create a framework that will offer some level of stability for institutions with respect to research funding. It is important to remember the wider context of the financial sustainability of universities in Scotland. The 2019 Audit Scotland Report on the "Finances of Scottish Universities"¹ is still relevant as it represents a recent, independent evaluation of the financial health of the sector. The report clearly underlines some of the financial pressures on institutions over recent years, and how these pressures are felt unevenly across the sector. Consequently, it would seem prudent on the part of the SFC to ensure that volatility in the system is managed to some degree across the different funding streams. Of course, there must still be a recognition of the development of institutions through the REF2021 scores, and excellence should continue to be recognised and rewarded through the allocation of funding. But limiting downward changes in REG would be a sensible policy to ensure stable funding and to support institutions to plan, grow and execute more long-term strategic objectives with respect to research and innovation. The first principle under consideration in the scope of any adjustments made should be the sustainability of finances and stability in terms of research capacity. There needs to be a consideration made for the relative impact on an institutions overall research income caused by any downward changes. A secondary consideration could be strategic importance of funding to wider national objectives of government. And thirdly, the relative impact of research in the local area.

¹ https://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/uploads/docs/report/2019/nr_190919_finances_universities.pdf

QUESTION 3: YOU ARE INVITED TO COMMENT IN YOUR ANSWERS THROUGHOUT THE DOCUMENT ON OPPORTUNITIES FOR AND BARRIERS TO ADVANCING EQUALITY AND ACHIEVING INCLUSION. OVERARCHING COMMENTS RELATED TO THE AIMS OF THE PUBLIC SECTOR DUTY IN THE CONTEXT OF THIS REVIEW SHOULD BE MADE HERE.

It is important to put this question into the wider context of equality and inclusion in Scottish higher education. Modern universities in Scotland make a remarkable contribution to access and participation to university as well as advancing equality in all aspects of university life. In Scottish higher education, 56% of students from disadvantaged backgrounds and 66% of mature students study at modern universities. Modern universities represent one third of institutions, which underlines the disproportionate impact they make in relation to the statistics offered above. To understand equality and inclusion in higher education in Scotland it is also important to consider place. The geographical reach of modern universities in Scotland cannot be understated. This overlaps with the socioeconomic dimension of equality and inclusion, because many of the areas or localities of modern universities would not otherwise be served by higher education and represent some of the more peripheral and deprived communities in Scotland.

Social and geographic also inequalities exist in the research world. There is a broad correlation between the more affluent and productive geographic parts the Scottish economy and research funding, as well as a broad correlation between the class or socioeconomic status and participation in research. Research funding is generally blind to economic geography, and it would be good if there was some awareness built into the process with respect to the social and economic inequalities that exist across Scotland and how the distribution of research funding relates to this. This is not to suggest that excellence shouldn't be the primary determinant of REG, but there might be a little bit more awareness of the relative impact of research in different areas, and perhaps most importantly how this actually relates/affects local communities. MillionPlus believes that the consideration of impact has been an important addition to the research agenda, and although not perfect, it at least opens up a window to seeing the other side of research and its relationships to space and the local economy. Thinking about who research serves, and who benefits from research is key to advancing equality and spreading opportunity.

Modern universities undertake high quality research in areas of Scotland where often there would otherwise be little or no research base. There is a strong argument to be made that all universities, even those heavily focused on teaching, should have some level of research at their institution, so it can inform teaching and expose students to a learning environment that has research activity embedded into the wider structures of the institution. It follows then that funding needs to support this, so that an appropriate level of research can be maintained at universities. This will help to boost access and diversity in postgraduate research, and by extension, the research community. The presence of some level of research within the institutions that do the heavy lifting on access and participation at undergraduate level will serve to prevent research being siloed across different groups of students.

One barrier to a diverse pipeline of students entering postgraduate research is that they are made to feel that research is not "for them" by nature of the institution they attend at undergraduate level. There is also a strategic imperative to ensure that research and development funding is spread across the country to support local economic development in the areas that have traditionally been underserved or "hard to reach". Research with impact can increase productivity and thereby increase prosperity in local communities. For obvious reasons with respect to equality and inclusion, it would not be wise to limit these benefits to areas that surround the most research-intensive institutions. In short research can play a role in local economic development and placemaking across Scotland. In order to support equality and inclusion, therefore, research funding needs to be utilised, so it can be invested broadly across institutions.

QUESTION 4: HOW IMPORTANT (OR OTHERWISE) IS IT THAT THE SCOTTISH APPROACH TO UNDERPINNING RESEARCH FUNDING IS IN STEP WITH THE REST OF THE UK? WHAT ELEMENTS OF CONSISTENCY (OR DISTINCTIVENESS) IN SFC'S APPROACH INFLUENCE SCOTTISH HEIS' RESEARCH COMPETITIVENESS?

MillionPlus members are strongly committed to the idea of UK system of higher education, and its Scottish members are proud to be associated with the wider family of UK institutions. Members are concerned that as policy develops and the higher education systems in the four nations diverge from each other, the integrity of the UK system will be undermined. Modern universities see the UK system as part of their identity as institutions and a key way in which they can enhance their own brand and standing in a competitive global market of higher education, be that a competitive environment of student recruitment, business collaboration or research. Research is one policy area where there is still a recognisable UK approach to some degree and MillionPlus would like to see this maintained where possible. In this regard, it is important that the allocation of recurrent funding is informed by the REF and that some of the fundamentals of how excellence is recognised are maintained across the whole of the UK with respect to recurrent funding. Divergence of quality marks or the "currency" of research could be problematic. Nevertheless, education is devolved and the Scottish government and the SFC are obviously tasked with helping to develop a research system through an approach that is specific to Scotland. There evidently needs to be some flexibility in the SFC approach so that it can understand the context of Scottish higher education and the nuances of the Scottish research landscape. This is where there is room to develop policy that is more in tune to place and the relative impact of research on a more localised level. A more devolved or place-sensitive framework for research does not necessarily mean divergence from Westminster, as the UK government will be seeking to focus more on place through its "levelling-up" agenda over the next couple of years, which is also likely to bleed into the work of UKRI.

QUESTION 5: IN THE CHANGING RESEARCH LANDSCAPE, IS THE BALANCE OF FUNDING BETWEEN SFC'S UNDERPINNING SUPPORT FOR RESEARCH AND UNDERPINNING SUPPORT FOR PGR TRAINING & ENVIRONMENT OPTIMAL?

MillionPlus members have remarked that funding allocated for environment is currently at a minimum of what is really needed to invest building a thriving research environment. The sufficient level of funding that is needed in each research institution is also relative to existing capacity. More money is required for those who are starting with smaller research infrastructure. There are no easy answers to this problem. This is demonstrated by the fact that the research environment is arguably the most complex part of the REF.

QUESTION 6: VIEWS ARE SOUGHT ON THE PRINCIPLES PROPOSED FOR REF AND ON WHETHER THE PROPOSALS WITHIN THIS PAPER ARE CONSISTENT WITH THE PRINCIPLES.

MillionPlus is content with the principles as outlined on page 10 of the consultation document. They are understandably quite general so as to encompass the overall approach. The detail that follows appears to adhere to these principles through the following principles:

- To support excellent research "wherever it is found"
- To use REF2021 to shape allocations
- And to "... not concentrate funding further"

MillionPlus believes that, taken together, these proposals can create a framework that is consistent with the aforementioned principles. There is of course a need to strike the right balance between these proposals as they will pull in different directions in some ways. But ultimately, MillionPlus does not believe that these proposals are mutually exclusive, and all can be satisfied to some extent. The end goal here, as outlined by

the principles is to create a system of funding that provides a sustainable funding for the Scottish research community, recognizes high quality research, and supports growth and innovation in the full spectrum of higher education institutions

QUESTION 7: WHAT ARE YOUR VIEWS ON WHETHER THE CURRENT QUALITY WEIGHTINGS FOR 3* AND 4* REF SCORES ARE FIT FOR PURPOSE?

MillionPlus has for some years had reservations in relation the level of weighting that is afforded to 3* and 4* research, not only in Scotland but across the UK. Research that is given this quality mark should of course be recognised and celebrated, but the risk is that the level of weighting attributed perpetuates the distribution of funding that has always existed, which ends up contributing to the concentration of funding seen in our system and inhibiting growth and innovation in smaller or less research-intensive institutions. It is notable that in the case of one of our members, the University of Highlands & Islands (UHI), it was largely European Funds that supported the path towards university title for this institution and the quite rapid expansion of research capacity that followed. In other words, it was primarily European funds that enabled this institution to plan strategically and develop a vision for the institution, of which research output and standing was a key part. It is worth pausing and reflecting on this quite remarkable trajectory for one moment as it links directly to the question in hand. In the 1990s, if you had said that there would be a university that operates across the highlands and islands of Scotland that would generate 69% of its output at 3* or 4*, few would have believed you in the sector.

Surely, funding should be structured in such a way that at least creates some space for all institutions to attempt such a transition. The more weight that is placed on 3* and 4* research in the allocation method, the harder this is to achieve. The timing of this is also crucial, as the UK is about to lose access to European funding streams and the future of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, the successor to these funds is so uncertain. It may be beyond the control of the Scottish Government, or the Scottish Funding Council, as to whether this replacement framework can support strategic development of institutions as happened in the case of UHI, and ultimately support increased research capacity. That leaves the REF as possibly the one major funding lever available for institutions in Scotland to create that space and transform themselves, by planning more long-term vision with respect to research.

MillionPlus is not arguing here that weighting on 3* or 4* research should be abandoned. But there is a real opportunity here to expand funding to support the developmental nature of research and growth of research capacity and excellence in Scottish institutions. One way to go about this would be to recognize research at 2* as a means of supporting development. This would not negate the distinction of 3* and 4*, but could serve as an additional way of recognizing quality and capacity. Some in the research community have remarked on how the REF offers us a distinction between 1* and 2* research, but this is barely ever utilised in policy development or resource allocation. Indeed, many who are well acquainted with the world of research and research funding would argue that differentiation between 1* and 2* research is often a lot more informative than that between 3* and 4* research.

MillionPlus would encourage it to take this opportunity to look at how funding can support developmental investment in research. Much of the narrative on nurturing academic talent would chime well with a policy that focuses on the more development. While recognition of 3* & 4* research should be maintained, additional levers could be introduced to create more space for innovation in the system that would serve to act against a hyper concentration of reach funding and increase its "reach", both in terms of geography and social impact. Notwithstanding our response to question 5, we believe that this could be an area where Scotland leads and others follow.

QUESTION 8: WHAT ARE YOUR VIEWS ON ALIGNING THE PROPORTIONS OF REGA ALLOCATED AND THE PROPORTIONS OF REF SCORE ELEMENTS?

MillionPlus is generally content with the balance of the different elements that make up REG as outlined in the document.

QUESTION 9: WE WOULD WELCOME YOUR VIEWS ON THE BALANCE BETWEEN THE ELEMENTS OF THE REG FORMULA. WITHIN THE INCOME-DRIVEN ELEMENTS, WE WELCOME YOUR VIEWS ON WHETHER WE HAVE INCLUDED THE CORRECT INCOME SOURCES.

n/a

QUESTION 10: ARE THE PROPOSED PRINCIPLES FOR RPG APPROPRIATE AND CONSISTENT WITH THE PURPOSE OF THE GRANT AND THE CHANGING PGR LANDSCAPE?

n/a

QUESTION 11: WE ARE SEEKING VIEWS ON:

THE PURPOSE OF RPG AND ITS FUTURE ROLE IN SUPPORTING SCOTTISH INSTITUTIONS TO RESPOND INDIVIDUALLY AND COLLABORATIVELY – TO THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE.

TAKING FORWARD INCREASED ACCOUNTABILITY FOR RPG, FOR EXAMPLE BY LINKING TO SHARED OBJECTIVES OR OUTCOMES, AND HOW SFC AND THE SECTOR COULD WORK IN PARTNERSHIP TO ACHIEVE THIS.

MillionPlus has some reservations about the proposal to introduce increased accountability and the potential extra administrative burden that this might bring for institutions. This is not to downplay the importance of accountability in the process. But there is already a considerable amount of administrative burden for institutions to comply to in relation to research. Where possible, this consultation should be an exercise in trying to simplify the system.

QUESTION 12: WE ARE SEEKING VIEWS ON:

HOW THE RPG COULD PLAY AN INCREASED ROLE IN IMPROVING PARTICIPATION OF UNDERREPRESENTED GROUPS WITHIN SCOTLAND'S PGR COMMUNITY, PARTICULARLY WITHIN SPECIFIC RESEARCH AREAS WHERE UNDER-REPRESENTATION IS MOST EXTREME.

HOW SFC'S FOCUS ON WIDENING ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION COULD BE SUPPORTED BY RPG IN THE POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH STUDENT CONTEXT.

There is a general point to be made here that, based on the track record of modern universities in contributing to this agenda, a surefire way to increase PGR diversity would be to utilise the expertise and reach of modern universities. Equality and inclusion are in the DNA of modern universities and increasing the number of postgrads at these institutions will spread opportunity and increase diversity by nature of the communities that modern universities are tied to. This is not to say that places or funding should be based on this criteria. But it might require some more direct action to incorporate a greater appreciation of diversity and inclusion into the RPG in order to enact change. Based on the historic record of the sector, the status quo does not seem capable of "improving participation of underrepresented groups within Scotland's PGR community" to the level desired by the SFC or the Scottish government, if the existing models are simply reproduced. This links to the response given to question 3, where it is pointed out that a broad investment in research activity by institutional type/location is likely to support a more diverse pipeline of students into

postgraduate study. Even if the population of PGR students remains concentrated in more research-intensive institutions, encouraging a base level of research at all institutions helps to create a system where all teaching is informed by research in some way, and one where all students are more likely to see a career in research within their own horizons. There are parallels here with much of the wider work on diversity and inclusion that uses the notion that, for many underrepresented groups, “you have to see it to believe it”. MillionPlus would of course advocate for more PGR students in a greater diversity of institutions, that is to say less of concentration of PhD students in Scotland by institution. And there is a sound logic, as outlined above, to how this will increase participation in the PGR community, because it is modern universities that have the expertise and knowledge in these areas and have forged links into the communities that the SFC intends to tap into in order to achieve this objective.

QUESTION 13: PLEASE MAKE ANY OTHER COMMENTS RELEVANT TO THIS CONSULTATION.

n/a