

# 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:

Organisational response

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.

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

### 1. Strategic decision-making

Universities, and the research they do, have significant impacts on regional growth. The funding that is allocated by research councils plays an important role in this. However, the impact of government policies on research funding since 2010 in both parts of the dual support system mean that more investment has been concentrated in a smaller number of universities. In 2012/13, 75% of the funding available from the research councils and national academies was shared by 22 institutions. Government policy has also tended to emphasise larger project investments which require high levels of match funding from institutions, potentially undermining some of the principles of independence that have underpinned research funding.

The strategic decision making of the Research Councils should take into account the various national priorities, but should balance these with local and regional needs, considering how investments in particular projects and particular universities can drive economic growth in the local area. Government policy priorities will clearly be of influence, but the role of the research councils should be to place these in the wider context and ensure that funding allocations are based on academic considerations.

An emphasis on larger projects – both in terms of scale and in terms of match funding that is required – can serve to benefit institutions that have more capacity to bid and manage large schemes. This risks ‘locking out’ smaller institutions that have demonstrable research excellence. These institutions are often in partnership with small and medium enterprises in their areas, so are highly significant in terms of the local economy. The scale of investment needed is often small but can be very effective so Research Councils should increase the emphasis they place on these research activities.

Strategic priorities that drive research funding remain important, but there is sometimes the risk that valuable projects can miss out on funding if they do not easily match any of the priorities. (This was a criticism of initiatives like innovation vouchers which in the past have been restricted to particular sectors.) The Research Councils should consider whether more emphasis should be placed on investigator-led projects, especially those that seek to promote partnership with local businesses as a way to achieving local economic growth.

Since 2010, opportunities for many universities to secure capital investment for their research infrastructure via the funds made available to the Funding and Research Councils have been increasingly difficult due to a focus on large scale projects and a requirement to provide match-funding. The lack of public investment in university infrastructure will impact on the capacity of institutions to maintain internationally recognised research and limit opportunities to compete for external funding. Research infrastructure is also important for other reasons: it provides a base to invest in new and emerging disciplines, supports the development of research staff and provides a foundation for postgraduate study including in areas in which many research-intensives universities are not as engaged. Research Councils can and should play a role in addressing the challenges facing universities in infrastructure investment when considering funding allocations.

Research Councils have increased the focus on impact in recent years. However, in many parts of the research funding system, there remains a bias towards 'blue skies' research (for want of a better term). Applied and translational research, much of which is necessary to drive business growth and improve local economies, receives far less support and is relatively underfunded. Research Councils should consider in far more detail the actual economic impact of research activity as a counter to an emphasis on blue skies / original work. Both are needed, but the economic impact of public investment needs to play a bigger part of decision making.

## 2. Collaborations and partnerships

The research councils (along with funding councils and individual universities) are best placed to make decisions about science and research investment. This principle is applied through the allocation of research funding. There may be occasions when particular capacity or expertise means that it is beneficial for other organisations to be involved, or for there to be greater collaboration with non-university partners, but Research Councils need to be careful not to allow investment intended to support university research to leave the sector. We would expect universities to be at the centre of any Research Council investment.

The impacts of concentration discussed in Part 1 can also be found in the policies designed to promote and support collaboration and partnerships. The scale and capacity required to bid for and manage very large research investment is often biased to research intensive universities that have large staffing infrastructures. This means that smaller universities, despite having research excellence, are often expected to be partners of a broader consortium. One of these areas where this is especially visible is in the creation of doctoral training partnerships and centres, which risk excluding smaller universities and individual academics from being involved due to geographical or capacity constraints. This can have an impact on widening participation and access to research careers. There are clearly benefits from providing cohort based training, but Research Councils need to balance this against other issues.

## 3. Balance of funding portfolio

Funding for Research Councils has to be seen in the broader context of the overall science and innovation investment by government. The UK invests far less as a proportion of GDP than most of its OECD competitors (around 1.6% compared to an average of around 2.5%, with the direct investment from government comprising a minority of the UK figure). Research Councils should be clear in advice they give to government that an overall increase in the science and innovation budget would be a vital contribution the government could make to the Research Councils' role in funding research. Research Councils could also be challenging government to consider greater support for translational and applied research.

Notwithstanding the criticisms above about the impact of concentration of funding due to government research policies, the dual support system serves to strike a reasonable balance between priorities. Research Councils should be clear in advice to government that the system

benefits from its independence, and that excessive emphasis on political priorities could harm the strength of the system.

We have noted above some of the issues that arise from larger, strategically-focused projects. Research Councils should be careful not to pursue policies and funding mechanisms that restrict the ability of universities with small pockets of excellence to engage in and access investment opportunities.

The impact of the concentration of funding has geographical consequences; because of the location of the universities that receive large allocations, many areas in other parts of the country may miss out on investment. Our report, *Smarter Regions Smarter Britain* (March 2014), discusses how regional growth can be supported by universities, including through research activities with local businesses. Research Councils should consider the role they can play in addressing some of these imbalances when allocating funding, for example through encouraging collaboration between smaller universities.

#### 4. Effective ways of working

##### Operational

Research Councils should give further consideration to whether the pool of peer reviewers is sufficiently large, and to the process for appointing/allocation of proposals for review. There is a risk that preconceptions (about methodology, deliverables etc.) are skewing the allocation of funding and exacerbating its concentration. There is also need to ensure that peer reviewers are effectively 'trained' in identifying differences between 'fixable faults' and 'fundamental flaws' in research proposals. Without this, there is the potential to create bias in the process (albeit unintentional), which could lead to inequality of access to funding and resources. This is particularly important in considering the availability of funding for interdisciplinary and cross disciplinary research proposals.

##### Structural

The growth in collaborative and multi-disciplinary approaches to research and an increasing focus on applied and translational research that supports universities to work with SMEs requires new ways of working. Research Councils have invested a lot of time, energy and money in encouraging both a greater understanding of the value of collaborative approaches and of the impact of research.

There is a challenge to all of the Research Councils that arises from these new approaches. In thinking beyond single discipline original research and working to support multi-disciplinary, impact-focused research, the Councils will need to consider how much of a barrier to innovation is created by the current structures in place.

The traditional subject/discipline based organisational structure present in all seven Research Councils may in time make it more difficult for universities and academics to understand the best places to access funding. This is particularly important when considering areas like the creative industries, where emerging digital technologies cut across traditional STEM/arts boundaries. A similar challenge is found in the social sciences, where there is wide variation in subjects and disciplines. The boundaries between disciplines are ever more fluid, and innovative solutions to research challenges do not 'respect' the traditional definitions. Research Councils will need to reflect on whether current structures need further reform to ensure that they remain fit for purpose.

##### Strategic

In our recent report, *The Innovation Challenge* (September 2014), million+ recommended that government should establish a new fund for translational research to better support the exploitation

of original published work to the advantage of business and industry. This new funding could also support greater engagement by small and medium enterprises which would benefit working with universities, but find it challenging to do so because of capacity issues. In considering their place within the wider science and innovation system, Research Councils should how they can address these issues in managing funding schemes and engaging with academic communities.

## 5. Any other comments?

N/A

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:

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