

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:

This response is submitted by the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG), the learned society and professional body for geography. The response is informed by a consultation with the heads of geography departments (or equivalent) in institutions across the UK, the Society's research committee, and members in higher education institutions across the UK.

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.

Dr Rita Gardner, Director
Dr Catherine Souch, Head of Research and Higher Education, Royal Geographical Society (with IBG); E: rhed@rqs.org

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

1. Strategic decision-making

- We strongly support the continuation of the dual funding support for research in the UK (Funding Councils (QR) and Research Councils (RC)). While there is a relation (in general) in the distribution of RC income and mainstream QR income across universities, there are very different allocations across STEM, social science and humanities disciplines. Strong and balanced support across all disciplines needs to be sustained. Virtually all challenges of the 21st century, in the UK and world-wide, have a human dimension. The insights of social scientists and those in the humanities, as well as those in science, engineering and health, are critical.
- While the *shape* of research support matters, *volume* matters more. UK R&D spending is below the European Union average, a fact that challenges aspirations to make the UK a 'knowledge economy'. Spending Review 2015 should increase and, at least, sustain the public budget for science and innovation. We support the proposition of the Academy of Social Sciences (in *The Business of People*) that the science budget should be ring-fenced and increased in real terms by 10 per cent over the life of the 2015-20 Parliament.
- We support investment in both *disciplinary* and *interdisciplinary* research. Strong disciplines and disciplinary research underpins strong interdisciplinary research. Breaking down barriers to cross-research council working is needed to enhance interdisciplinary work, as is recognition and investments in disciplines, such as geography, that bring ideas, methods and approaches associated with high quality interdisciplinary research (transcending the natural and social sciences and humanities) on topics of strategic importance.
- We stress the importance to the UK of 'blue skies' and fundamental research across all disciplines. There has been a trend towards larger grants and programmes and stronger central direction of research themes. While important, resources do need to be directed to developing independently-led creative ideas, innovation and serendipitous discovery. There should be an increase in the proportion of funding for investigator-led work and the number of beneficiaries of such support.
- We also stress the importance of training researchers, higher level skills and doctoral training partnerships (see further comments below).
- Attention does need to be given to the relative balance of awards across the RC in terms of recipients – by discipline, by region, by career-stage (particularly with attention to early career scholars), by gender and ethnicity. A cross-Council register would make this much more

transparent. Dedicated calls/budgets should then be used to address imbalances.

- Practice for Early Career Researchers (ECRs) is very different between RC; this is problematic in itself. In some RC, NERC is one example highlighted to us, it is particularly challenging for ECRs. We urge RC to reinstitute small grants/new investigator grants to nurture and encourage the next generation of environmental/social scientists.
- Capital, facilities and equipment funding across RCs is limited, yet the impact on research and innovation can be enormous. We propose innovation linked infrastructure calls. Moreover, RC capital equipment rounds should have comparable transparency to other calls in how money is allocated, with clear criteria from the outset re how decisions will be made.

2. Collaborations and partnerships

- We commend the joint calls with other agencies (DFID as one example) in terms of leveraging more resource and supporting greater impact.
- We encourage RC to work more closely with Learned Societies (those with appropriate capacity) in the delivery of research but even more so in outreach, public and policy engagement (see further comments below).
- RC are getting better in capturing interdisciplinary research, but projects can still “fall through the cracks” if panel membership does not support interdisciplinary areas.
- We would suggest more in terms of innovation block grants to universities to fund commercialisation activities.
- We encourage RC, NERC specifically, to provide more positive incentives for pooling equipment bases (e.g. regionally), given the cap on equipment at £10K, with 50% thereafter in special cases. HEFCE block grants or Capital Funds cannot be relied upon to fill this need. This is especially important in emerging areas, small departments or new universities. Investment in a few large prestige projects which will benefit comparatively few has the potential undermine the overall status of many world-leading UK facilities.

3. Balance of funding portfolio

- Given the centrality of society/people to most of the challenges the world now faces, more investment is needed in the social sciences/humanities (ESRC, AHRC) alongside STEM.
- The thematic approach has secured some collaborative working between RCs but does not extend to the capital programme for science or to higher education funding or wider government research work. This is an area to be addressed.
- There remains a critical need for funding to maintain world class instrumentation for lab and fieldwork that is needed by individual groups/departments (see comments above).

4. Effective ways of working

- We believe the RCs could be more strategic in how they deliver on impact, both individually and collectively. There are challenges, given they do not ‘own’ the knowledge base, and have not compiled fully searchable databases even of the research they themselves have commissioned. We strongly advocate closer working with Learned Societies (LS) to deliver initiatives in schools/education, public engagement and policy. RC should not try to replicate existing networks and initiatives that in some disciplines, with some LS are well developed. Allocating resources to initiatives with leading Learned Societies would efficiently leverage more impact and more effectively join together the universities, research units, academies and other stakeholders in concerted action. Learned Societies should be able to be the

PI/lead on such funding bids.

- We ask the RC to very carefully review the PGR block grant support: the administrative burden this is placing on HEIs through the processes of bidding and allocations (especially when centres are short-lived), the implications for institutions (there is a strong geographical element to patterns of support), disciplines (particularly those that cross-Research Councils), and longer term sustainability and returns on investment.
- More harmonisation is needed across Research Councils, from administration to process to management. For example, OA for Data Management. EPSRC came out long ago with their policy that starts in this year. Other RC are far behind. Moreover, there is huge variance in how panels operate with respect to reviewer scores versus evaluations of panel membership.

5. Any other comments?

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

OGL