

AHRC consultation on PG Funding

The following report represents a collation of the responses of heads of English departments and related units in HEIs across the UK consulted by the Council for College and University English during October 2006.

General Comments

The questions asked below are focused on the level of the detailed implementation of a BGP scheme. The sector would welcome a prior discussion of the viability and desirability of the scheme in principle before such second-order questions of implementation are considered. As things stand the proposal has a strong air of the *fait accompli* to it.

In particular we would welcome discussion on the suggestion that the idea of a block award might work more efficiently and naturally at MA level rather than PhD. On Masters programmes there is a greater degree of continuity and homogeneity in both student numbers and research content from year to year, allowing for considerable forward planning and strategic thinking. At PhD level, on the other hand, recruitment can be more volatile and research topics more idiosyncratic. Might it be advisable to trial the scheme at MA level first to test the potential pitfalls and troubleshoot for adverse, unintended outcomes rather than roll it out across all programmes in one hit?

On the level of detail, the responses from departments and schools vary, rather predictably, depending on the size and track-record to date of the institutions concerned. Those large units which already account for the majority of AHRC awards not unnaturally see this as an opportunity to consolidate that success and remove some of the uncertainty about the success of individual applications; smaller units that have fewer (but nonetheless some) excellent candidates and have always struggled to find the funding for them are unsurprisingly anxious that these proposals will 'fix' what they perceive as an already uneven playing field and further divide the sector between 'haves' and 'have-nots'.

The distinction between large bids (150+) and small ones (at 5. 8 in the document, or in another place, medium and small bids) has caused some general anxiety. It is not clear what the justification for making such distinctions is, or whether it is proposed to treat bids of different sizes differently. It would not, in our view, be a good use of research money to favour large institutions *a priori* or those with historic strengths in a given area without close scrutiny of the current situation. This would militate against the emergence of new areas of research and new centres of strength and tend to institutionalise past records rather than current strengths and future potential.

1. How would a BGP bid be formulated in your institution?

The general assumption here is that bids will be formulated at school/faculty level to maximise on the possible 'Economies of Scale'. There is some unease over the potential impact this may have on subject specialism. The AHRC will take a strategic overview at the national level, but they cannot ensure subject balance and equity *within* institutions. We would hope that bids will fairly reflect existing strengths and facilitate agreed areas of development, but they may well not do so.

2. Does your institution have an existing strategy...?

N/A.

3. Would you prefer to bid for a sum of funding...or...for a number of awards at a fixed unit cost?

The latter would seem to reduce the possibility of institutions trying to 'poach' students by offering higher subsistence awards or other elements of 'game playing'.

4. What would be the advantages of allowing a five-year planning cycle?

The five-year cycle is broadly welcomed, as it will provide greater stability and the opportunity to plan for sustained research development. It also promises to lighten the administrative burden for academics as well as the AHRC. At present, as we know, this is particularly heavy given the amount of detail required in relation to individual students (who frequently have a poor chance of success.) However, this gain may be counterbalanced by the amount of supporting detail required for the block grant bids – evidence of research expertise, track records, special resources, facilities, links with partner institutions, etc.

5. Would the BGP work more effectively if some flexibility were allowed to institutions once awarded?

Yes, given the inevitable volatility of staffing and student circumstances, institutions should be allowed to redirect awards within broadly similar disciplinary areas to reflect staff departures, arrivals, etc.

6. Do you foresee any issues with the implementation of BGP in the sector?

The document proposes a two-stage process for the assessment of bids, one in which proposals are graded against the published criteria, and a second in which the balance of funded proposals is reviewed to ensure that the AHRC's strategic goals are met. This points to the tension at the heart of the document, between excellence and strategic imperatives. Where the old system was led by excellence, the new is weighted towards 'strategic' planning both at the AHRC and at the institutional level. The dangers of any strategic planning-led scheme is that priorities such as the desire to appear to be fulfilling research 'useful' to the government of the day or to find schemes which facilitate collaboration between different research councils, international bodies, etc will get in the way of the priority to find the best research **whatever** its source or nature which has always been the driver of excellence in UK research to date.

The reduction in the scope and scale of the 'responsive mode' funding has also prompted some concern. It is not always the case that senior scholars are able to predict in advance

where the areas of research vitality are likely to fall up to five years in advance. We would recommend the continuation of a broader degree of individual funding to cater for excellent proposals from students and or supervisors that do not fit neatly with institutional planning. As things stands the open competition has an air of the vestigial and the token to it.

7. Do you have any proposals for improvement to the model?

Retention of a stronger element of open competition funding.

A clearer statement of the thinking behind and rational for the ranking of institutional applications by size.

8. N/A