

**AHRB Review of Postgraduate Programmes**  
**and**  
**Proposals for changes to AHRB provision of postgraduate study and training**  
**January 2002**

**Joint Response: The English Subject Centre and the Council for College and University English**

***Introduction***

This paper is a joint response to the above consultation document prepared on behalf of the English subject community by the English Subject Centre and the Council for College and University English (CCUE). It has been written by mandated individuals from both organisations, and follows a survey of opinions from all English Departments. We recognise the AHRB's desire to receive responses that 'reconcile the views of different academic communities', and we are responding here to the Consultation Document's call for the 'considered views of ... organisations' (iv). For the purposes of this paper, colleagues were requested to represent the perceived academic interests of the subject in its broad and diverse manifestations. This response follows the template for responses provided, as far as this is possible.

***1. Overall, does your organisation support the broad thrust of the green paper and the recommendations contained therein?***

While responses to the AHRB document varied considerably, most respondents felt that the review was timely, and for the most part, realistic in its consideration of the broad range of issues. The document, and its consultative mode, is therefore broadly welcomed. There is wide support for the 'emphasis on the continued refinement of student-centred research training provision'; the 'commitment to student-driven competitions', and some guarded commendation of the incipient collaborative model for research training, although it is also clear that there is a need to protect the high-quality innovative work currently provided in some smaller institutions. The difficulty of the task now confronted, to balance out the competing demands within an assumed steady-state financial model, is appreciated: nevertheless, there are some concerns about re-balancing listed below under the relevant sections of the template.

***2. Which elements of the green paper does your organisation particularly endorse, and why?***

In addition to the points listed above, we offer the following in relation to specific paragraphs. Where endorsements are accompanied by some qualifications, these are listed here rather than stated separately.

Paragraph 47. Structure of Schemes: Most of the provision in English of taught Master's programmes would fall into the first category of the schemes outlined here, as such provision does not usually include a primary focus on the vocational. There is some concern about the proportion of advanced research training outlined (75%) although this concern may partly stem from the ambiguity surrounding the reference for the phrase in parentheses. Is it the case that 75% of these programmes should be taken up by 'academic study and advanced research training that is intended to provide an underpinning for further research'? If so, then this concern will be much diminished. If the reference is to research training only, it will be amplified. The need to categorise the different kinds of degrees supported is generally recognised as important. (There remains, however, the question of which of

these categories a Creative Writing programme might fall into. As there are a series of enquiries about this area of work, these are gathered together at the end of this document).

Paragraph 58. Part-time awards: The Board's intention to give better publicity to the availability of part-time awards for doctoral work is warmly welcomed.

Paragraph 59. Policy on funding part-time Masters and Diploma: The intention to continue not to fund these programmes is consistent with the policy emerging in this document. However, we would point out that one reason for the rapid growth in the numbers of part-time MA students is the scarcity of awards for the full-time pathway.

Paragraph 61. Balance of Awards: Although it is clear that the remit of the AHRB will be better served by the adjustment to the distribution of the awards suggested here, we would point out that this exposes a policy gap in the broader area of student support. The intention not to provide composite 1+3 awards, and therefore to encourage movement into and out of the 1+3 structure after the first year, is strongly supported. It is nevertheless important to recognise that the strength of such mobility relies partly on the provision of Masters awards that emphasise advanced and specialised knowledge, and these, in turn, require the maintenance of a diverse system where students profit by moving between institutions.

Paragraph 62. Project studentships: There is some support, in this subject, for schemes by which awards are attached to academics receiving funds for large research tasks (for example, the editing of large texts, the compilation of corpus materials). This is one area in which the science model might indeed be appropriate in the Arts and Humanities, where projects of this kind can stretch over a decade or more currently. However, the caveat here, stating that such schemes 'should not become a dominant feature of the Board's provision' is welcomed, and reassuringly suggests that such proposals will be developed in a discriminating and careful manner.

Paragraph 67. Methods of Allocating Awards: With the exception of the project funding described above, there is no support for moving away from the model of student-driven competitions as the principal mechanism for allocating awards. The merit of the individual application is recognised as the best overarching criterion.

Paragraph 73. Methods of Allocating Awards: The proposal to revise the formula for the allocation of awards in order to reflect strengths and activity levels is strongly supported, and seen as being properly consistent with the policy to reward merit, and nurture research that is internationally prestigious. It is felt that the current system is too vulnerable to the liability of having to turn down high-quality applications. It is also recognised that the Board is sufficiently mindful of the complexities (paragraphs 72 and 74) to ensure that adequate provision will be made for quality and innovative research alongside such a revision, and we agree that this is important.

### ***3. Which elements cause concern to your institution and why? Do you have alternative proposals?***

Paragraph 6. Mission and Objectives: While it is clear that the AHRB will be expected to offer a mission broadly comparable with that of the other research councils, there is some wariness about the increased attention proposed here for the 'needs of the knowledge economy employers'. There are concerns that such attention might permeate through into a revised assessment process for the awards, and that innovative and 'blue skies' research needs to be protected against creeping instrumentalism. Further, while it is the case that numbers of postgraduates go on to seek careers outside the academy and the teaching profession, a great many do not, and, in the context of the government's agenda for increased participation, we need to be clear about the fact that both the needs of the knowledge economy, and the interests of employers, are in this subject area largely encompassed by the academy and its close relations to the teaching profession and the creative and cultural industries. At the same time, the subject community is aware of the need to raise the profile

of postgraduates' transferable abilities, to enable them to seek appropriate high level employment wherever they choose.

Paragraph 67. *Methods of Allocating Awards*: There is some disquiet at the suggestion that the apparatus around the assessment of applications might be diminished (the Board's 'determination to ensure that the administrative burdens of the competition are minimised'). While the diminishing of administration itself is always likely to meet with approval, the possible translation of this policy into a reduced regard for the academic potential and capability of the candidate is seen as a danger, and there are also concerns that this reduction might make the process less transparent. There is also some feeling that the current assessment is insufficiently rigorous, given that there is no interview, and that there is no request for a sample of recent academic work. It is understood that the addition of such materials or process could be fraught with difficulties, and this recognition has provoked the view from one department that the current centralised system, since it cannot guarantee this rigour, should be abandoned in favour of allocations to departments, who would themselves then become responsible for their distribution. There is also strong feeling that the method of allocating studentships in open competition should be transparent, and more, that the Board should consider ways in which feedback could be provided for Universities and candidates. Feedback would also help both individuals and HEIs to understand the issues about matching students with programmes (paragraph 63), and those inconsistencies referred to in paragraph 43, and the worrying statistic identified in paragraph 86. Feedback mechanisms could refine the process, produce better understanding, and improve performance.

#### ***4. Further input and suggestions on paragraphs 54, 57, 68, 82, 84.***

Paragraph 54. *Doctoral Study Structure*: The recommendation here for the AHRB to lead a debate on changes to this structure in order to enhance quality and standing is supported. In advance of this debate, there are serious concerns voiced in our constituency about the consideration of a 2+2 model, particularly if such a model were to be adopted simply for the purpose of mirroring structures favoured by the other research councils. Departments in England, particularly, tend to favour the 1+3 model on account of the model's capacity to develop a foundation of research skills while simultaneously building specialised subject knowledge, before going on to undertake doctoral research which, by the very scale of its tasks (in independent reading and in writing) will require a full three years of study. There are worries that a 2+2 model might be injurious to the depth and authority of the doctoral thesis at its best, although we are aware that some departments have shown tentative interest in the development of other models, largely on the basis of concerns about the standing of the UK doctorate internationally. We would also point out that there seems to be a lack of consideration, in the consultation document, of the rationale behind the predominant patterns of postgraduate study in Scotland. Scottish Universities are geared to neither model: typically, students will take a four-year undergraduate degree, followed by three years of doctoral research. If they take one year taught Masters qualifications (MSc, MLitt, MPhil), and then move on to a doctorate, they commonly make arrangements for such work to be accredited within the higher award. It is also the case that even prestigious Universities in Scotland might not be well-placed, in resource terms, to mount one year taught awards in order to comply with the new structures. We therefore think that it is essential for the AHRB to ensure that the proposed debate takes in the views and experiences of postgraduate work in Scotland, most particularly with regard to the fact that the structure there is underpinned by an educational philosophy running through the whole framework of Higher Education.

Paragraph 57. *New kinds of Doctorates*: On the whole there is little support currently in this subject area for partnership collaborative awards, although the intention to initiate further discussion about the scope for development of new kinds of doctorates is given some cautious welcome. We urge the Board to gather advice and information from the context of experience which exists outside of the UK in such provision, and in the provision of doctorates with taught elements. A willingness to consider and perhaps, pilot, alternative models would be diminished, if such investigations were

made with adverse affect to what is recognised as the core activity of one to one supervision. It is strongly felt that the benefits of this ordinance need to be preserved.

Paragraph 68. Quotas: The danger in such allocations is that the means by which quality and merit could be guaranteed are in themselves, potentially complex and possibly unreliable. It is felt that in the context of pressured finances, such quotas could erode the provision for scholarly research at postgraduate level.

Paragraphs 82 and 84. Research Training: It is recognised that an increased emphasis on research training is inevitable, and some guarded welcome is given to the proposal that the Board should consider the introduction of research training support grants, and the introduction of the alternative model of innovative provision. There is also some support for collaborative provision, given the strain on some HEIs and Departments. AHRB sponsored pilot schemes would be welcomed in some areas of this subject discipline. There are, however, worries that the framework would lead to greater concentrations of awards, and we urge the Board to think carefully about the deleterious long-term effects that might ensue from such concentration, including the deterioration in the quality and variety of work, particular specialisms, and innovatory areas of study. There are also concerns that the Board may have made premature conclusions on the provision of training, which is to be so stringent that 'it is likely that relatively few HEIs will be able alone fully to meet them.' The concentration of this provision may in theory propose a model which gathers together areas of strength and expertise, but it may also prove inadequate for the very particular needs of students in this discipline, whose choice of supervisor may be a better indicator of their training needs, and a better source for their integrated and effective provision. In this respect, collaborative provision, if it is to evolve, will need to be highly sensitive to the stated aim to avoid 'prescriptive models' of core skills, and to 'refine student-centred research training provision.' There are also concerns about the conversion of the theory of collaborative provision into practice, which focus on the incentives for collaborative provision, and how a grant system for research training support might actually work.

Closely allied to this is a worry about the underfunding of the RAE, which has already placed pockets of excellent work in smaller or poorly funded institutions at risk. We would urge the Board not to develop policies that will compound such effects, since emerging areas of research achievement often have far-reaching and invigorating effects on the wider research environment.

##### ***5. Any other comments and issues.***

Paragraphs 13-17. Finance: There was some limited interest in the implication that HEIs themselves might meet part of the cost of the awards, such interest depending on the condition that this requirement would produce an increase in the number of awards overall. Also recorded in our responses was a view that Oxbridge award holders might be doubly advantaged, and the funds further pressurised, by the awarding of additional monies for College fees.

Paragraph 77. The ring-fencing of endangered areas: The ring-fencing of endangered areas of study, within the framework described, is acknowledged as a rational response to a problematic situation. We are also conscious of the need to recognise work that is going on between the disciplines and across the disciplines, and to some extent, we have concerns about 'famine' areas within the disciplines themselves. This is clearly a difficult issue, which a blanket policy is unlikely to solve. We agree therefore, with the strong statement about threshold quality standards, and would also recommend that the Board give careful consideration to the methods, criteria, and constituency, of the bidding scheme outlined here, and that it consults with the relevant professional associations and Subject Centres about such areas and their selection, while being mindful of interdisciplinary areas which may not be served by representative bodies.

Paragraph 90. Penalties: The data available indicates that penalties have had the desired effect, but there is also some feeling that the circumstances of completing candidates in their first academic

posts should be taken into account wherever possible.

Paragraph 92. Career tracking surveys: These would be valuable, but incomplete if they only tracked AHRB award holders. We recommend that the Board should continue to discover ways of collaborating with HEIs and other organisations to ensure that such surveys cover the whole spectrum of doctoral students and thereby produce the best available data for analysis.

Creative Writing. This is an area of work in English that is growing significantly, and raises a series of questions of pertinence here. The distinction between an 'academic' Masters award and a vocational award might be an uneasy one in the case of Creative Writing. The current pilot scheme is felt to be successful, and it is hoped that it will continue until such a time that its effects can be properly evaluated. There are some concerns that this review might result in policies that would prematurely collapse awards in Creative Writing back into an inadvertently prescriptive model. These points are raised here as a means of highlighting a particular concern that we hope will be given adequate attention in the consultations that will follow.

The broad context. The elements of this review are recognised to be highly complex, given that it is concerned to address the multiple purposes and values of postgraduate awards. Even so, it may be as well to explicitly acknowledge that these values and purposes are indeed different: the doctorate is, for a great many candidates, essential training for an academic position; for others it is a stand-alone award of intrinsic value; for some the doctorate is testimony to high-level skills that may be valued by non-academic employers. Addressing these elements separately in the consultations that will follow may be a means of preventing confusion. It is also the case that many of the issues canvassed here have been addressed by professional associations in the United States, and in particular by MLA, and its sub-division, ADE. These organisations have been attempting to profile postgraduate awards in such a way as to grant them a status compatible with the high-level knowledge and skills they elicit. The English Subject Centre is mandated by CCUE to collaborate with these organisations, and arrangements are in hand. We draw this to the Board's attention in the context of the discussions and consultation that will follow the review.