

UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK

For the meeting of the Steering Committee to be held on 27 April 2015

Subject Nurse Review of the Research Councils: Call for Evidence

Paper prepared by Professor Tim Jones, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Science, Engineering & Medicine)
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Purpose of the Paper

Following the Triennial Review of the Research Councils, Government ministers have asked Sir Paul Nurse to lead an Advisory Group to review how the Councils can evolve to support research in the most effective ways. A call for evidence was made in mid-March, inviting the research community to submit views and information for consideration as part of this review, with a deadline for submission of 17 April 2015. A Warwick response to the review was submitted by the Pro-Vice-Chancellors with responsibility for research.

Recommendation

The Steering Committee is invited to receive the University's submission to the Nurse Review.

Key Points

1. This review follows the recent Triennial Review of the Research Councils which found that 'individually they are operating from a position of strength', also highlighting important questions about their structure and function - in particular that the Councils might take a more proactive role 'both in responding to and also proactively challenging and shaping the Government's long term research agenda'.
2. Submission of evidence was requested from the research community in universities, research institutions, Government and industry in the areas of strategic decision making, collaborations and partnerships, balance of the funding portfolio and effective ways of working.
3. Responses received in answer to this call of evidence will be used by Sir Paul Nurse and the Advisory Group as they take forward the review of Research Councils, which is expected to report in summer 2015.
4. Input from all four faculties, and from individuals with key knowledge of particular Councils, were received to input in to Warwick's institutional submission which is attached at Annex 1. It is noted that many individuals and departments have also input to the review through other mechanisms, such as through their professional subject associations.

Route Map for this Paper		
Committee	Date	Action Requested/ Taken
Steering Committee	27 April 2015	<u>Receive</u> the University's submission to the Nurse Review
TBC		

Annex 1: University Submission to Nurse Review of the Research Councils Call for Evidence**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:

Response on behalf of the University of Warwick.

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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 University of Warwick

Contact:

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

1. Strategic decision-making

The issue of appropriate research funding is clearly one that needs to be resolved in the national interest. In this, there are three overarching key elements. First, quality is centrally important, as many have argued in relation not only to research funding in the UK, but also in the European context. Second, there is, in the national interest, an important responsibility for strategic direction including, where appropriate, taking into account the ability of research providers to work together in the regions. Third, research needs to be supported across the full range, from basic to applied, and in the latter case, it could be the case that examples of excellence could be better shared across the research councils.

These elements should be further underpinned by the engagement of the wider Academy, as well as other stakeholders, in strategic decisions as regards RCUK priority thematic areas. The more proactive engagement of universities at this early policy stage would be most useful in selecting innovative research challenges of the future. RCUK and Universities should work together more closely to prevent a saturation of new thematic ideas, thus allowing appropriate time for capacity to be built in identified strategic areas, and avoiding an overly short term approach to the UKs future research needs and planning. We would also welcome greater transparency around processes for selecting theme leaders for strategic initiatives in some Councils.

With regards to the decision making process – opportunities for inter-disciplinary research proposals should be aligned with Panels that can operate and review in a genuinely inter-disciplinary manner. Increasing the capacity of Panels to recognise innovation within an inter-disciplinary context, would facilitate the approval of innovative proposals.

Funding for postgraduate research is an essential component of the knowledge eco-system. We welcome support for the portfolio of doctoral training centres but also recognise the need for RCUK funding to be available for universities to provide studentships in a strategic manner. We also note that a potentially serious position is emerging in which studentships are not being fully funded – this will eventually build to saturation point within universities and should be urgently addressed. CDTs are specialist in nature and this should continue to be balanced against the less specialist funding routes in order that we maintain a healthy balance in terms of the research skills of the future Academy.

Warwick welcomes the introduction of Impact Acceleration Accounts from the majority of the Research Councils, and would strongly support their continuation. Their introduction has allowed us to develop new strategic impact initiatives that would not have been possible without this funding. However, with some Councils it was felt that the initiation of these funds were rushed and Universities were not given appropriate time to respond to the calls. It is also felt that it would be beneficial to ensure that Impact Acceleration Accounts are made available from all individual councils. It is recognised that additional opportunities for generating impact can emerge after a research project has started and may require greater flexibility for supplementary use of IAA funding where it can be proven that the impact is unforeseen and exceeds the scope of the original research project. Some Impact Acceleration Accounts (e.g. ESRC) are setting up networks to enable sharing of good practice between institutions in areas such as policy engagement at the local, national and international levels. This model could be extended to other sectors, such as business interaction, for example working in partnership with the National Centre for Universities and Business (NCUB). This would be particularly useful if extended across all research councils.

We welcome the recent recommendations following the review of Pathways to Impact. However, it would be useful to have greater clarification on the relationship between public engagement and impact, emphasising the value of public engagement activity for research. In addition, the provision of guidelines, case studies and training in this area would enable researchers to develop public engagement strategies more effectively within their impact activities, where appropriate. It should be highlighted in application guidelines that Pathways to Impact should be taken into account in the justification of costs.

The Research Councils are encouraging engagement with Parliament through links with the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology. However, there could be greater co-ordination between Government departments and RCUK regarding opportunities and mechanisms to engage with and influence policy at local and national level. For instance, further guidance would be welcomed regarding mechanisms for engaging with Government Horizon Scanning Programmes, where there is an appropriate link with research projects.

The University welcomes the recent introduction of the Catalyst Seed Fund to support the embedding of excellent public engagement with research in the policies, procedures and practices of research institutions. We would support the allocation of further strategic funding to enable the development at cross-institutional level of impact and public engagement strategies, with a particular focus on the role of university research within local and regional contexts.

Also relevant to the 'impact' agenda is the way in which translational research is supported across Research Councils and other Research Funders. There has been some notable effort to co-ordinate across different bodies (including for example the work of the OSCHR to support translation across the basic biomedical sciences and into clinical outcomes). These efforts should be increased and built upon – translation of research in whatever discipline

does not happen in a linear fashion and therefore the separation of funding sources into different translational areas does not adequately support innovation – for example the assumption that EPSRC and Innovate UK fund different gaps in the translation pathway should be challenged so that there is some flexibility available across funding bodies to catalyse and support innovation across the translation pathway.

2. Collaborations and partnerships

With reference to RCUK working together, and with other organisations such as HEFCE and Innovate UK, we would urge that that a consistency across key policy statements is achieved; Open Access publication is a good example of where this has not been achieved, to the confusion and detriment of the wider community, and leading to significant inefficiencies and cost.

RCUK has made good progress on supporting inter-disciplinary research but should build on this by increasing the capacity of peer review panels to recognise excellence within an inter-disciplinary context, and to ensure that potential research projects do not inadvertently fall between different Councils. In addition, cross-Council initiatives in the areas of ‘grand challenges’ are becoming increasingly complex in their management across several Councils (with different ways of working and sets of guidelines). Schemes that explicitly support researchers to develop cross-disciplinary skills, or to move in to a new discipline, should be encouraged. Principal Investigators who are moving to a new discipline or taking their research in a different direction sometimes struggle to win support from the RCs because the applicant’s lack of experience or track record in the new area is not well received by peer reviewers.

Whilst there is an increased focus on the research response to the grand challenges, it is difficult to secure funding for interdisciplinary doctoral training that would support the development of capacity and skills to address these areas. Thus we would welcome funding for interdisciplinary CDTs that bridge both disciplines and Research Councils. The Leverhulme Trust’s Doctoral Scholarship scheme is an example of good practice in this area.

As stated above, we would welcome a more facilitatory approach towards investment across the translation pathway and this request extends to the provision of funding for interactions between universities and other bodies such as Industry, Catapults, Innovate UK and the LEPs for example, noting that this funding must be fit for purpose in terms of university research (much regional funding has been overly prescriptive and restricting in its application and some thought should be given towards improving this for innovation projects).

We welcome the opportunity to work with other institutions on new initiatives such as The Alan Turing Institute, and within equipment sharing arrangements such as that proposed by regional consortia. However, the enabling infrastructure which underpins such collaborative approaches must be improved; issues such as VAT, the governance of Joint Ventures and other critical matters do not always receive the necessary attention and these then serve as barriers towards collaboration and significant cost. We would be willing to engage in some focussed thinking around these issues in order to learn as a sector from past experiences

and move forward with some workable solutions.

We support the Hauser recommendation that Catapults should consider new and more effective ways to engage with universities – in some areas this works well and in others it is difficult for universities to access the Catapult. Improving these interactions would benefit all parties as well as having a positive impact on the wider economy. With regards to university interaction with business, there are some strong models emerging which could benefit from RCUK support; this would have to be focussed around a network of companies that was prepared to invest significant sums, to support research at both fundamental and innovative levels.

With regards to international collaborations, the difference in approaches across RCUK is in some ways understandable but a more consistent approach to some of the key opportunities (NSF for example) would be useful.

Where available, the ability to support international co-investigators on grants is extremely valuable in facilitating new and existing collaborations. The use of this opportunity has been extremely well received by the ESRC community, and we also welcome the AHRC's International Co-Investigator pilot. We recommend that this opportunity is rolled out to all the Research Councils. We also are pleased that the AHRC has committed to taking part in the latest HERA call on 'Uses of the Past'.

The Research Councils are individually involved in discussions on EU funding programmes, and we would welcome the Councils support in getting more researchers engaged in the process for setting the priorities for H2020 work programmes. We would also welcome a return of funding schemes used at times by several of the Research Councils to support researchers developing proposals for large collaborative projects to the EU H2020 programme.

Interdisciplinary Research

We strongly value the position of the individual research councils as research funders dedicated to the provision of funding in specific discipline areas, and would wish to see this position protected across all areas but particularly in respect of dedicated Arts and Social Science funding. The various research councils have very different cultures, support very different knowledge communities, with different types and levels of funding. It would be very difficult to come up with a 'one-size fits all' approach. Nonetheless, we welcome schemes that explicitly support researchers to develop cross-disciplinary skills, or to move in to a new discipline, should be encouraged. Principal Investigators who are moving to a new discipline or taking their research in a different direction sometimes struggle to win support from the RCs because the applicant's lack of experience or track record in the new area is not well received by peer reviewers.

Whilst there is an increased focus on the research response to the grand challenges, it is difficult to secure funding for interdisciplinary doctoral training that would support the development of capacity and skills to address these areas. Thus we would welcome funding for interdisciplinary CDTs that bridge both disciplines and Research Councils. The Leverhulme Trust's Doctoral Scholarship scheme is an example of good practice in this area.

Experience of cross council funding initiatives is that there is always a lead council that sets the 'tone' for the programme. A more genuinely collaborative approach to the subsequent

decisions should be sought.

3. Balance of funding portfolio

Balance of Funding and Gaps

Strategic funding is important as an effective way of supporting research that has benefits beyond academia, particularly those initiatives with a specific focus on applied aspects or requiring an industrial partner. However, it is also essential to prioritise investigator-led applications to allow genuinely new ideas to be developed and to ensure a balanced research portfolio, particularly in niche areas. Thus we consider that, broadly, the Research Councils generally strike the right balance between responsive-mode and strategically focused funding but strongly urge that responsive-mode funding is protected from further erosion. Much of our excellent research has emerged from bottom-up funding and therefore this crucial method of funding should be protected.

The Research Councils have experienced real cuts for several years now. This is a particularly pressing issue for AHRC and ESRC (for example the AHRC has the smallest budget of any of the Research Councils, receiving less than 3% of the BIS science and research budget, despite approx. 20% of the research-active academic community falling within the AHRC's remit (Llewellyn, M *ARMA AHRC Study Tour presentation*, 14 November 2014). The funds within the ARHC and ESRC space risk becoming non productive unless funding in this area can begin to increase.

Linked to the issue of the static science budget and resultant real cuts to research funds, is the issue of university match funding to research grants, which is increasing to the point of potential saturation. This is unsustainable and represents a significant risk to research. Capital funding is welcomed but must be associated with recurrent costs - this again will become unsustainable if the current position of capital investment without the required revenue continues.

Balance between funding teams and individuals

Whilst we support initiatives that fund collaborative research teams in many discipline areas, we equally value support for individual research – particularly for example many areas of the humanities. In terms of support for teams, it is not clear that RCs support funding for the *building* of teams as such. Whilst collaborative projects can, and usually do, include both co-investigators and postdocs, the objective of these schemes is the research project or programme not the building of teams or of capacity. We would welcome funding that is more directed to building capacity in teams of researchers, perhaps akin to the European Research Council schemes.

Regional Balance

Warwick has a long and successful history of engagement with across the region and city-

region. This is rooted firmly in our internationally recognised research and innovation base, which is an important catalyst for regional and sub-regional investment, creating a significant multiplier effect to the University's overall economic contribution. We have spoken above about a need to ensure more integration between RCUK and other Funding Bodies such as Innovate UK, and of ensuring that the Catapults are able to reach out more to industry. In terms of funding prioritisation, it is most important that RCUK continue to make investment on the basis of scientific excellence; this being as important for the regions as it is for the wider UK. It is however critical that, where genuine scientific excellence and innovation are present within a city-regional foot-print, that all Funding Organisations are able to take a flexible and pragmatic approach to funding across Scheme boundaries. It is also essential that any expectations on universities to deliver regional and city-regional projects are not overly constrained by inflexible regional funding streams.

4. Effective ways of working

The primary focus of RCUK should be on funding internationally excellent research that has impact. It is understandable that Government should want University research to contribute to the national wellbeing, but a narrow technocratic mission for RCUK leading to a too narrowly focussed notion of science and innovation is problematic and should be avoided. Indeed, wider society expects university research to challenge and question government policy. University research needs to reflect the often competing perspectives and interests across society, to aim at challenging and questioning current understanding and solutions, and to provide the evidence that assists government in making the right choices. Thus, there is a need to balance supporting more effective solutions and questioning the solutions that are being offered.

The University would welcome more opportunities for institutions and departments to engage with RCUK in order to build mutually beneficial relationships and improve communications. Opportunities for this engagement have diminished, and we would welcome dialogue at all levels. A more consistent approach to the funding process across RCUK would be welcomed. There is a great deal of variability in the timescales associated with Research Councils informing applicants of the outcome of their applications, which makes it challenging for applicants to specify a realistic start date. In many cases there is also a period of weeks or even several months between an applicant receiving the initial e-mail notifying them that their proposal has been successful and them receiving the official award letter. We would welcome an exploration of ways to reduce the time from application submission to final outcome, as there are often long delays that can have detrimental effects on the planned research if awarded. Feedback on unsuccessful grants can be highly variable in terms of quality, constructiveness and depth; greater consistency would be helpful to improve future applications.

We welcome regular open calls for nominations to the Peer Review Colleges, However, these opportunities could be advertised more widely in the community as they are often not seen by individual researchers. We strongly support the right-to-reply mechanism in place for some funding schemes. We believe that this makes the decision-making process transparent and academically rigorous and research can often be improved by revision in

the light of reviewers' or funding panel's feedback. Thus we would encourage the Councils to use the right-to-reply mechanism as widely as possible, or consider greater use of a two-stage application process, which would then allow incorporation of feedback.

There is some concern from the academic community that the peer review process in some Councils is not as stringent for strategic priorities as for responsive mode funding. Similarly, we would welcome greater transparency regarding the mechanism by which interdisciplinary applications are assessed.

5. Any other comments?

We conclude by restating our strong support for the dual funding system, and for the continued funding of scientific excellence wherever this be found. We reiterate our statement above that RCUK and other Funding & Policy Organisations could often take a more consistent approach to key strategic areas (such as Open Access) and ask that universities are engaged at an early stage in thinking around key research themes and priorities. We recognise the progress that has made to support inter-disciplinary research and ask that this be built on by improved processes of assessment and peer review.

Funding for recurrent and capital investment is critical and the rising requirement for University investment will eventually reach a saturation point, causing problems through the research eco-system.

Warwick is a highly collaborative institution that roots its relationships around research excellence. There are a number of practical things that we have outlined that require consideration in order to better support collaboration at international, national and regional levels and RCUK has a key role to play in this debate.

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

Postal Address:

Nurse Review Secretariat

Research Councils Unit

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