



Response

A Universities UK response on behalf of Membership
to a consultation by another organisation

RCUK consultation on the efficiency and effectiveness of peer review

Key points in this consultation include:

- We have some concern that the current reforms being undertaken to the assessment and funding processes under each arm of the dual support system are being taken forward in isolation.
- We would welcome reforms that succeeded in easing the load on the system, whilst ensuring that the best research can be supported wherever it is found.
- Proposals for the consolidation of grants are associated with a number of risks, which we feel reduce this option's viability quite significantly.
- Whilst recognising that there is scope for universities to be more proactive in improving the quality of grants prior to submission we would not support the proposal to set institutional level quotas.
- In principle, we would support the proposal to control the number of resubmissions.
- Greater use of outlines could significantly reduce the overall cost of the peer review system but would need careful management.
- Whilst the Research Councils' primary interest should be supporting excellent research wherever it is found, we welcome the enhanced focus on economic impact. This focus should be extended to impact of all research funded by the Research Councils, of which a great deal is, for example, important for public policy, the cultural sector and health.

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Introduction

1. Universities UK is pleased to respond to this consultation. We would like to take this opportunity to comment from a sector wide perspective and highlight some of the broader strategic issues arising from the proposals.
2. We are encouraged that a substantive evidence has been developed, which has informed the development of the proposals outlined in the consultation. We would welcome reforms that succeeded in easing the load on the system whilst ensuring that the best research can be supported wherever it is found.
3. Before answering the specific questions outlined in the consultation we would like to stress the importance of understanding the proposed changes within a broader HE research policy context.
4. Monies allocated for research through the Research Councils and through the UK funding councils make up the dual support system. These are two parts of a single system which are equal in importance but quite distinctive: Research Council funding goes towards the costs of research projects in pursuit of specific research priorities and QR has greater flexibility of use and is more like universities' own investment in their research.
5. As we indicated in our response to the recent DfES consultation on the reform of research assessment and funding, a key strength of the dual support system is that there are multiple sources of funding for research, with multiple decision points about what research should be supported and where research resources should be concentrated. This creates a healthy and dynamic research base in the UK. Universities UK strongly supports the dual support system, and welcomes the government's commitment that this principle should continue within a reformed system.
6. We have some concern, however, that the current reforms being undertaken to the assessment and funding processes under each arm of the dual support system are being taken forward in isolation. It is vital that an overview is taken of the impact of these changes to the dual support system to ensure that the basic principles underpinning its effective operation are not inadvertently undermined.

Consolidation of research grant funding

How might such changes be implemented in a manner that would meet the needs of your organisation and the UK research base, whilst maintaining the characteristics of an efficient and effective peer review system?

What level and length of funding, relative to your current Research Council funding, would be required for your organisation to consider this option more attractive than the opportunities currently available in responsive-mode?



What steps might Research Councils and research organisations take to ensure that more use of larger or longer-term grants would not reduce innovation and dynamism within the research base, and the support of new people and ideas?

7. Savings that could arise from this approach, in terms of writing proposals and making multiple applications, may be significant. It is, however, associated with a number of risks, which we feel reduce its viability quite significantly. Issues relating to this approach include:
 - The proposal for larger consolidated grants raises serious questions over the extent to which the integrity of the separate elements within the dual support system would be undermined, and in doing so undermine the health and dynamism of the research base.
 - Allocating funds via very large grants could be destabilising to smaller groups or departments. Individuals or small groups of excellence may fail to secure support because they lack the critical mass to attract substantial funding, despite doing world-class research. This erodes the principle that excellent research should be funded wherever it is found. It also has the potential to disadvantage early career researchers, new or emerging research fields or interdisciplinary research.
 - Increasing the size and length of grants would reduce the flexibility needed to fund the wider spectrum of research projects, as the range of grant types available would decrease.
 - There is a danger that the correlation between quality and actual funded work could be undermined.
 - Researchers in consolidated groupings could become complacent if funding was guaranteed for long periods. This would reduce competition and dynamism in the system. In addition it would prevent institutions from improving their funding as a result of improved research performance.
 - This approach has the potential to increase workload within universities when preparing bids, as more costs could be transferred to institutions. Also, whilst the volume of applications may be reduced the cost per application is likely to increase. The allocation of centrally held resources to individual academic schools and departments and subsequently to researchers and research groups could require new processes to be developed with associated costs.
 - This approach is unlikely to be applicable to the arts and humanities and social sciences subject areas where the scale of Research Council funding available limits the capacity to build up strong records needed by the consolidation model.
 - The introduction of a bar on an investigator applying for additional funds would be operationally very difficult (for example, would this apply to the PI or co-investigators?).

8. Some limited level of consolidation, along with the use of longer award periods may be possible and more appropriate in some subjects than others, typically those which operate through larger groups, and this already happens in some research areas as the report acknowledges. To ensure that larger, longer-term grants would not undermine the dynamism of the research base, and give rise to



the problems outlined above, light touch external reviews could be introduced. Before pursuing this option further RCUK should consider assessing experiences from the EPSRC experiment in 'portfolio partnerships'. This may provide a better model than the PPARC rolling grants mentioned in the report.

Institutional level quotas

How might this change be implemented in a manner that would meet the needs of your organisation and the UK research base, whilst maintaining the characteristics of an efficient and effective peer review system?

What steps might Research Councils and research organisations take to ensure that institutional quotas do not result in a comparable or increased level of peer review cost due to the establishment and operation of selection processes within research organisations?

What steps might Research Councils and research organisations take to ensure that institutions would continue to submit proposals for collaborative, high risk and interdisciplinary research, and proposals from early-career researchers?

9. Whilst recognising that there is scope for universities to be more proactive in improving the quality of grants prior to submission we would not support the proposal to set institutional level quotas. Key concerns relating to this proposal include:
 - Whilst this option may reduce the costs to the Research Councils there would be a significant increase in the costs to universities and thus not reducing the burden as a whole.
 - A rigid quota system would reflect past excellence rather than future potential and could favour well established research groups, at the expense of emerging groups, early career researchers, or collaborative work.
 - Quotas are likely to result in an increase in size and complexity of projects, which will affect the costs of the system, and the success rates. This could also lead to artificial partnerships, and overly complex projects.
 - A quota system might result in a more risk-averse culture with any applications from those with a successful track record being submitted.
 - Quotas are unlikely to change as quickly as the nature of the Frontier in academic areas - this could stifle innovation and expansion.
10. We strongly support the observation (p61) that the current system's ability to fund high quality research wherever it is found is a major strength and should not be compromised.

Controlling resubmissions



How might the Research Councils best manage resubmissions from the research community? In particular, what steps could be taken by Research Councils to distinguish between a resubmitted proposal and a genuinely new proposal?

11. In principle, UUK would support the proposal to control the number of resubmissions. This method is widely used by academic journals and can work as an effective filter reducing the burden.
12. The problem with preventing resubmissions is that many grants considered to be of international quality are not awarded because of insufficient funds in a given round. Also, some of the best research may not be funded first time around, often because the peer-review system judges it to be too radical at the time. Such proposals could be allowed to be resubmitted with the investigators allowed, or even required, to revise their proposal taking on board the reviewers' comments and including any new data etc. Such grants could then be competitively reviewed alongside the rest of the applications for that round. Without such procedures the result of preventing resubmission would be to ensure that applicants play safe in their project proposals, (even more so if this were to be combined with quotas).
13. To help manage the resubmission process we would be supportive of a move to allow only invited resubmissions within a given period. Clear criteria for inviting resubmissions would be required and the process should be transparent and consistently applied.
14. Successful management of resubmissions would depend on the quality of the feedback that was produced for both failed submissions and invited resubmissions. Depending on the nature of the required changes, potentially the resubmission should not need to go through all of the stages that would apply to an initial proposal so as to reduce the burden.

Greater use of outlines

How might this change be implemented in a manner that would meet the needs of your organisation and the UK research base, whilst maintaining the characteristics of an efficient and effective peer review system? For example, how might any potential impacts on increasing the time taken to fund new research or reduced effectiveness in identifying the highest quality research proposals be minimised?

What impact would the greater use of outline proposals have on the number of outline and full proposals submitted to the Research Councils, both within your organisation and across the UK research base?

What steps might Research Councils and research organisations take to ensure that the overall time saved on the preparation and peer review of full proposals would be greater than that incurred by an increase in the number of outline proposals?



15. This option could significantly reduce the overall cost of the peer review system and improve the quality of full (final stage) proposals but would need careful management. In order to ensure that the overall time saved on the preparation and peer review of full proposals would be greater than that incurred by an increase in the number of outline proposals clear guidelines would be needed to assist both applicants and institutional research managers. Sufficient time would also be needed between notification of the outcome of the outline stage and the deadline for applications, so that preparation of the full application starts only when the go-ahead had been received.
16. Any mechanism adopted would, however, need to be carefully designed to ensure that it did not discriminate against innovative proposals or other bids.
17. The use of outlines would need a differentiated approach, to reflect the nature of the activity. Possibly, outlines should be used for larger / longer projects, with full proposals being used for smaller / shorter ones. More complex projects take longer to develop, hence the saving could be largest. It would also be important that the Research Councils learn from those schemes where they already use outline bids.

Assessing economic impact

Without compromising research quality, how could Research Councils develop the peer review process to ensure that potential economic impact is effectively reflected within proposal assessment?

How can Research Councils ensure that reviewers have the skills, experience and information necessary to assess effectively potential economic impact?

18. Whilst the Research Councils' primary interest should be supporting excellent research wherever it is found, Universities UK welcomes the enhanced focus on economic impact following the Warray report. We would add, however, that this focus should be extended to all impact of research funded by the Research Councils, of which a great deal is, for example, important for public policy, the cultural sector and health.
19. Assessing the potential economic impact as part of the peer review process does, however, raise a number of issues. Crucially, not all research has an immediate and obvious economic impact. Assessing potential economic impact would be particularly difficult in the basic sciences where any impact is likely to be very long term; or with more innovative proposals, when the outcomes are less certain. The potential economic impact will also vary between discipline areas.
20. We would therefore suggest that the economic impact factor should become part of the assessment process, but not a key determinant. This might be achieved by ensuring that all applications and



review forms contained a question about economic or other impact or included the requirement for applicants to specify, against a standard set of criteria, what the impacts and potential benefits might be. Reviewers will need clear guidance from the Councils, in terms of what is being sought and the weighting it should be given in the process, perhaps by use of exemplars. Some use of 'expert users' in the peer review process would be beneficial, and those experts would need to be drawn as appropriate from across the breadth of users appropriate to different areas of research.

21. It is, therefore, essential to note that impact cannot be understood in economic terms alone, and that, where appropriate, the review of potential benefits, users and beneficiaries of the research should encompass wider criteria, such as social, cultural and policy-related impact. This would ensure that all dissemination and knowledge transfer opportunities are included.

General questions

If the four options (i.e. consolidation; institutional quotas; controlling resubmissions; greater use of outlines) were to be implemented in the manner you have suggested, which would you recommend?

22. Although we have significant concerns over the potential implications of options one and two we believe that there is scope selectively to introduce a mixture of elements of each of the options e.g. some consolidation, at research group level along the lines of EPSRC's Portfolios and an increase in project duration in certain areas; better management of submissions with improved feedback; and the use of outlines, particularly for larger proposals. The way in which these elements are applied will of course be determined by the activity. There are risks involved that have been outlined above and in the Report itself. This would suggest that changes should initially be piloted to ensure that the problems of unexpected consequences or perverse behaviour are identified before the changes are extended more fully.

The Project Board considered that selective disincentives (pp 61 -62) for individuals, or indeed organisations, with particularly low success rates may offer a way to improve efficiency but considered that charging for proposals (pp 63-64) would not produce material savings. We would welcome your views on these conclusions and your input on the types of disincentives (including charging) that you thought would be effective and how they could be best applied.

23. Charging for submissions would not be an appropriate way forward and UUK would oppose this. We would also oppose proposals for artificial quotas. As discussed above the better management of resubmissions with strengthened feedback processes would be more appropriate.