

Research Excellence Grant and Research Postgraduate Grant responses

Date / time response submitted	12/01/2022 13:54
In what capacity are you submitting your response?	Organisation
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Overarching issues	
Q1. If it were necessary, what would be the implications of delaying implementation of REF 2021 results and changes to REG until AY 2023-24?	Concerns would arise if SFC and Research England took diverging approaches, as this risks splitting the dual support system: the choice to implement or delay implementing REF2021 outcomes should be made at UK level. For individual institutions, a reduction in budget applied with no opportunity to plan will exacerbate financial challenges facing institutions. If there is a risk of potential further slippage in the timetable, we suggest that it would be least disruptive to the sector to employ a transitional model, with transitional funding applied for 2022-23 and actuals which fully reflect REF2021 only applied for 2023-24 onwards. Honest, early conversations with institutions on any potential losses - or gains - from REG and REF results changes in 2022-23 or beyond are important to mitigate the impact and allow institutional internal responses to take place. As we experienced with additional, and very welcome, in-year REG allocations during 2020-21 and 2021-22, it takes time to plan to spend income over a planned budget, just as it does to handle any reductions below that budget.
Q2. Should SFC seek to limit downward changes in REG experienced by individual universities post REF2021 and, if so, what should be the scope of any adjustments made?	We would support limiting changes in 2022-23 and the use of transitional funding approaches to limit stark downward changes year on year. Whether a small institution with a small REG grant, or a large institution with a large share, the REG is critical - it allows funding to flexibly support areas of growth and excellence; for large research-intensive institutions like Edinburgh, REG is a fundamental element of dual support and any swings can be significantly material and can lead to change in income in the multiple millions, which represents a large number of jobs, many of which were protected during the Covid-19 pandemic using the additional research-related funding provided by SFC/Scottish Government.

	However, multi-year restrictions on downward funding changes limit the ability of REG to reward success and ambition within Scotland's universities as reflected in REF results and success in winning grant income. This is particularly true in an environment where research capital is restricted. As noted earlier, even more critical to limiting impacts of change, is clear, early communication with institutions, with 2022-23 viewed as transitional so any changes are phased.
Q3. You are invited to comment in your answers throughout the document on opportunities for and barriers to advancing equality and achieving inclusion. Overarching comments related to the aims of the public sector duty in the context of this review should be made here.	We assume that SFC will make use of data available through HESA on distribution of research staff across protected characteristics at different Scottish universities in identifying the impacts of the changes to REG on institutions of varying mixes of characteristics. We take our public sector equality duty extremely seriously, having used a significant proportion of our additional research Covid related funding in 2020-21 to put in place a Chancellor's Fellows scheme aimed at early career researchers from BAME groups, and particularly also female researchers, in recognition of the differential impacts of the pandemic on colleagues with these protected characteristics.
Q4. How important (or otherwise) is it that the Scottish approach to underpinning research funding is in step with the rest of the UK? What elements of consistency (or distinctiveness) in SFC's approach influence Scottish HEIs' research competitiveness?	It is very important to us that SFC is aligned with policies in the rest of the UK with respect to the recognition of, and underpinning support for, excellent research. If SFC is in a position to award funding to the highest quality research at a higher rate than other UK countries this would of course be welcomed in enabling the sector to increase its positive impact on Scotland's research and development priorities, but overall it is key that the funding model is close to that in the rest of the UK. We compete in a UK pool for the research grants and contracts which form the other element of the dual support system, awarded with an expectation of underpinning funding for research excellence. Being in a competitive, easily comparable position is fundamental to the application process. An example is that the weighting of 4* at 4:1 in England assists our direct competitors in supporting their most high-quality research.
Q5. In the changing research landscape, is the balance of funding between SFC's underpinning support for research and underpinning support for PGR training & environment optimal?	We suggest that the current balance is appropriate. We can and do use REG funding to support the broader environment in which PhD students are supported. We welcome this flexibility and would not wish to restrict this further. Many areas in which research postgraduate students need support also apply to early career researchers and we have a greater opportunity to make gains for all through a broader use of research funding rather than restricting to a single population.
Research Excellence Grant	
Q6. Views are sought on the principles proposed for REG and on whether the proposals within this paper are consistent with the principles.	These principles are a reasonable reflection of the needs of the sector and of Scotland. We would add 'predictable' to 'sustainable' as this reflects the value of REG in supporting emerging disciplines and supporting the full costs of research.

Q7. What are your views on whether the current quality weightings for 3* and 4* REF scores are fit for purpose?	We consider that a steeper gradient of the slope between 4* and 3* - at least 4:1 - would be appropriate. Emphasising the importance of 4* research will help to grow areas where Scotland is world-leading, and thereby increase the wider social, economic and diplomatic benefits brought about directly and indirectly through these strengths; and incentivise HEIs to strive for excellence in these areas. We also consider it likely that the changes to REF rules (through reduction in the number of outputs required per staff member) will increase the proportion of both 4* and 3* research within Scotland's REF results, thus leading to wider distribution of REG across Scottish HEIs; increasing the 4* weighting will help to recognise the highest performing of units within the model, in an environment of constrained resource for REG. In addition, as we noted in response to question 4, this keeps us in step with the QR model in England.
Q8. What are your views on aligning the proportions of REGa allocated and the proportions of REF score elements?	We would cautiously welcome this approach as this brings us into line with the model in England and ensures that the relative proportions of the results are rewarded appropriately and equitably, although we would expect the changes to distribution based on this revised method would be marginal.
Q9. We would welcome your views on the balance between the elements of the REG formula. Within the income-driven elements, we welcome your views on whether we have included the correct income sources.	Ensuring that the relative cost of disciplines is recognised is particularly important, especially in light of the proposed removal of the STEMM weight. Alignment with the work carried out by Research England will be important as it is unlikely that disciplines have different cost bases across the different UK nations. In light of the above, it might be considered that removing the STEMM weight is premature; however, our own modelling suggests that the influence of the STEMM weight on the actual distribution of the grant is relatively minimal and as such, in the interests of simplifying and making the grant more transparent, we are content with its removal. We support continued recognition through REG formulae of the need to underpin research which falls outwith the UK dual support system. These are critical sources of inward investment to Scottish research and there is a risk of disincentivising universities from pursuing these, which would be to the detriment of Scotland's global contribution/reputation and ability to collaborate with partners outwith the UK. We consider that the balance between REGa and the income driven elements is close to optimal. Substantial reductions in REGa would send the wrong signals: in relation to the importance of supporting and rewarding research judged to be world-leading research; drawing into question the role of the REF as a tool to identify strengths in Scotland's research; and

	undermining the importance of supporting research in new and established disciplines which attract lower levels of external research grant funding. However, we would support a modest increase to REGc - recognising that this is more likely to impact on REGa than REGb. Research charity funding is critical in supporting medical research, but post-Covid more than ever, charities cannot afford to pay full costs while achieving the maximum impact from their funding. Charity funding is critical in tackling long and short-term health challenges, and with Scotland's expertise in medical research and endemic health issues, ensuring that universities can continue to afford to apply for these grants is essential.
Research Postgraduate Grant	
Q10. Are the proposed principles for RPG appropriate and consistent with the purpose of the grant and the changing PGR landscape?	These principles are broadly in line with the UK government reviews (BEIS R&D People and Culture Strategy), cover much of what is required and seem future-proofed as well. One possible addition would be to recognise the importance of retaining and attracting talent into Scotland. This would especially apply to the talent pipeline. Another possible addition would be to stress flexible provision to support PGR students into a range of career trajectories across business, policy and third sectors as highlighted in the recent reviews by EPSRC and ESRC. Our income associated with RPG students consists of fee income and RPG and the data shows that we recover around 60% of our costs. This means that to sustain our postgraduate education we must cross-subsidize it from other income. The need for cross-subsidy will increase over time as much of our fee income is pegged to the UKRI home fee rate which, although it grows with inflation, covers only around 20% of the FEC of a student. Finally, we would add that RPG should be based on reliable data and a review of the data used to calculate RPG would be welcomed.
Q11a. We are seeking views on the purpose of RPG and its future role in supporting Scottish institutions to respond – individually and collaboratively – to the changing landscape.	The University of Edinburgh's Strategy 2030 focusses on tackling the “Grand Challenges”, through interdisciplinary research, working closely with international and local industrial and other partners, as well as contributing as fully as possible to the local environment. Identifying the needs of various stakeholders is a key part of this. Doctoral students play a vital role in fuelling our research and, as leaders and researchers of the future, need to be trained to face these challenges and learn to work with partners effectively. Examples of this can be seen recently in the valuable contributions of PhD students to research into the pandemic. One use for funding for PGR would be to help with the transition to work especially in STEM areas

	where some early postdoctoral experience might be a useful bridge. It is also a possible way to help retain talent in Scotland and feed the industrial pipeline. The BEIS People and Culture Strategy estimates that by 2030 the UK will require an additional 150,000 R&D staff and that represents a considerable increase in PhD students, predominantly in STEMM disciplines, but also in humanities, art and social science areas. This can only happen if we can increase the number of scholarships for students; UKRI have a public commitment to do so but that will only provide a proportion of PhD places. The rest will need to be funded by industry and by the HEIs themselves. UoE invests over Â£10million each year in PhD studentships and this will need to grow to meet the demands of our future society. Clarity on use of RPG funding for this purpose would be welcomed.
Q11b. We are seeking views on taking forward increased accountability for RPG, for example by linking to shared objectives or outcomes, and how SFC and the sector could work in partnership to achieve this.	There is already a great deal of training for PGR students occurring jointly across HEIs in Scotland both in small scale CDTs and also in shared teaching across whole subject areas. This enables students to access a significantly wider suite of training and research facilities. There is also a significant amount of co-supervision between institutions which not only benefits the students but helps to foster collaborations between staff. The University is strongly committed to providing mandatory training for supervisors. We also provide examiner training. There is scope to work with other institutions to streamline the generic aspects of the courses.
Q12a. We are seeking views on how the RPG could play an increased role in improving participation of underrepresented groups within Scotland's PGR community, particularly within specific research areas where under-representation is most extreme.	A case can be made that greater accountability for PGR training linked to the RPG may see improvements in the participation of underrepresented groups. There are dangers in this approach such as increasing bureaucracy but it may be a good way to increase awareness and provide some motivation to institutions to take concrete steps to improve the figures. There is also much work to be done to improve the mental health of our research students.
Q12b. We are seeking views on how SFC's focus on widening access and participation could be supported by RPG in the postgraduate research student context.	An expectation that a proportion of RPG should be spent to help widen access would be welcome. For example, UoE is keen to expand its portfolio of scholarships aimed at widening participation. We would be keen to see this extend to widening access for all students across the globe and not just those defined by narrower local criteria. Any Widening Access strategy, including targeted or ring-fenced scholarships, must be evidence-based and draw on relevant data about those interested in or intending to apply, applicants, offer-holders, decliners, and enrolled students. The collection of data about the protected characteristics of PGR enquirers and applicants can be fragmentary or non-existent. Moreover, the collection of data about non-protected characteristics including socio-economic background is fraught with difficulties relating to definition, 'mutability' and the degrees of

	â€˜independence' of graduates from their parents/background - problems which are often less significant for undergraduate EDI data collection, and HEIs will need to resource workstreams and systems changes to collect and utilise this data efficiently and ethically.
Other comments	
Q13. Please make any other comments relevant to this consultation.	It is critical that the Research Excellence Grant continues to support Scotland's ability to attract and retain the research talent needed for Scotland to continue to discover and innovate. The most straightforward route to doing so is to support the highest quality research and to ensure that the full costs of carrying out research can be supported. Research works best when it can be conducted in genuine partnership and it is important that the Research Excellence Grant does not disadvantage this. Our commitment to collaborations with other Scottish institutions is reflected in our participation in research pooling and our joint submissions to REF exercises. While we recognise the financial constraints imposed on SFC's total budget by the Scottish Government funding settlement, it is our hope that SFC are able to reflect the importance of supporting research of the highest quality wherever it is found through the Research Excellence Grant.
Publication of responses	
We may publish a summary of the consultation responses and, in some cases, the responses themselves. Published responses may be attributed to an organisation where this information has been provided but will not contain personal data. When providing a response in an individual capacity, published responses will be anonymised. Please confirm whether or not you agree to your response being included in any potential publication.	Publish information and excerpts from this survey response INCLUDING the organisation name.

