

RCUK Efficiency and Effectiveness of Peer Review Project

Introduction

The University and College Union (UCU) represents nearly 120,000 further and higher education lecturers, managers, researchers and many academic-related staff such as librarians, administrators and computing professionals across the UK. We welcome the opportunity to respond to the *Research Councils' Efficiency and Effectiveness of Peer Review Project*.

The UCU is a strong supporter of the principle of academic peer review as the essential basis on which to judge the quality of research. Peer review is not perfect but it is widely understood and generally well respected within the academic world. It is also a relatively cost effective way of making use of existing expertise and of spreading knowledge of research activity among academic colleagues. At the same time, we recognise that the current process involves a large amount of staff time spent preparing and reviewing projects. For this reason we have welcomed recent initiatives to reduce the administrative burden on academic staff, for example, via a greater use of electronic submissions.

However, we are extremely sceptical about the fundamental premise of the RCUK review: i.e. that there is an urgent need to reduce the volume of applications. We believe that cutting the number of applicants is effectively giving up on the problem of insufficient funding and will further reinforce the inherent conservatism that is the downside of peer review. We are also concerned about the narrowness of the study and the notion of 'cost' that it used in the project. In our view, the biggest cost of the research council system is not the applications process but the endemic use and abuse of fixed-term contracts. **The best way to reduce the 'costs' of the research council system and to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of current procedures is to enable the creation of permanent, open-ended contracts for research staff.**

1. Consolidation of Research Grant Funding

Option 1 looks to change the pattern of awards – either by consolidating existing grants into larger awards or increasing the length of the awards, for example from three to five years. We acknowledge that some research councils such as the Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council (PPARC) already have specific funding provision for longer-term and larger-scale funding for leading research groups. While this makes sense in subject areas that require hugely expensive equipment, there is no reason to extend this principle to the rest of the research councils, particularly low cost disciplines in the arts, humanities and social sciences. Small grants in these subject areas play a vital role in

enabling new researchers to undertake research and also provide an important funding opportunity for staff in less research-intensive institutions. UK research funding – on both sides of dual support – is already highly concentrated in a small number of universities and we are opposed to the further concentration of research council funding within the top 10% of institutions. Consolidating funding would also increase the dominance of existing paradigms and institutionalised intra-disciplinary authority. **As a result, the UCU opposes the proposal to consolidate research council funds into larger awards.**

During the UCU's consultation exercise, a small number of members argued that longer awards may provide additional benefits for 'early career' researchers. At the same time, they stressed that five year awards would need to be accompanied by a concerted campaign to improve the career opportunities for all research staff. Given the lack of real commitment on the part of universities and funding bodies to reduce the numbers of fixed-term contracts, most UCU members, however, remain sceptical about the positive effects of longer awards. In addition, our members are concerned about the detrimental impact of five year awards on the prospects for research development and careers in the post-92 sector.

As a result, we reject both the consolidation approaches outlined in option 1.

2. Institutional-level quotas

Option 2 seeks to reduce the numbers of applications by introducing some form of institutional-level quota. In essence, the research councils would establish a target success rate or target number of applications and then these would be distributed to eligible institutions based on some form of algorithm. **The UCU believes there are major risks associated with the institutional quota approach.**

As in the case of option 1, cutting off the opportunities for whole institutions to apply for grants would further concentrate resources in a small number of HEIs. Under the current system small project grants are often the main source of research funding for academics in the post-92 sector. These funds have enabled staff to get on the research ladder and have helped to boost capacity across the sector. Research council funding must continue to operate on 'a level playing field based exclusively on the quality of the application' rather than reflecting one's institutional affiliation.

We are also very concerned about any proposal to enable institutions rather than individuals to decide whether or not they are able to apply for research grants. Such a process will disproportionately disadvantage 'early career' researchers as well as new or emerging research areas. Both outcomes would reinforce the conservatism of the peer review process. At least at present individuals can 'have a shot' at bidding for funds and that is important for new researchers and for academic freedom. The proposals to introduce internal university quotas would also increase the power of institutional managers to decide who can apply for research funds. Moving part of the burden of peer

review from the general research community to institutions or departments will make the process much more personal as people are much more likely to know who has prevented their grant being submitted. As one respondent suggested:

“To have your project turned down on the basis of unknown expert reviewers, while disappointing, will be viewed by most people as more objective and less personal than a decision by your head of department or a small group of your colleagues. Adopting an institutional quota may well lead to a significant increase in grievance cases against the institution for blocking their ability to apply for research funds (and effectively blocking opportunities for career progression).”

A similar view was expressed by a UCU member at Heriot-Watt:

“The idea of institutional quotas is particularly deadly since then researchers would have to deal with an internal political process that might well not depend on scientific merit at all and would require a completely different case from the external one. It would also in my view reinforce the corporatism already rampant in universities.”

We do not want to see further institutional ‘games-playing’ applied to the research council leg of the dual support system.

Finally, it is questionable whether institutional quotas would actually lead to any reduction in the overall cost of peer review. We fear that the preparation and reviewing burden would simply be transferred to universities from the funding bodies, i.e. as occurs in relation to the RAE.

For these reasons, UCU strongly opposes the proposal to introduce institutional quotas for the research council responsive mode.

3. Controlling Resubmissions/Recycled proposals

Option 3 seeks to control re-submissions to the research councils by limiting the recycling of proposals within the system. We recognise that the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) already has some experience of controlling resubmissions. However, we are concerned about the possibility of extending this to all eight research councils. We remain sceptical about whether it is always possible to distinguish a ‘resubmission’ from genuinely new proposals. It is also questionable as to whether option 3 will actually result in a reduction in overall costs. As one of our members at Birkbeck has suggested:

“Any tightening of resubmission/recycled proposals would be counter productive. It is acknowledged that there are many projects close to the funding line that in an ideal world would be funded. To make it even harder for these projects to be redeveloped and resubmitted would waste even more resource as instead the academics involved would have to develop a completely new set of ideas.”

Moreover, grants are sometimes rejected by awarding bodies for internal ‘strategic’ reasons and as a result there needs to be freedom to apply elsewhere. **For these reasons, the UCU does not support the introduction of option 3.**

4. Greater Use of Outlines

Option 4 seeks to introduce an outline bid stage to the application process for responsive mode grants. The aim is to reduce the time invested in peer review, i.e. outline bids are seen as less onerous than full project ones.

It is difficult to estimate the impact of compulsory outline bid stages on the overall cost of peer review, for example, will a less burdensome process actually stimulate the number of applications? Outline bids are also likely to result in reduced feedback to applicants and a greater possibility of wrongly sifting out a strong proposal. It is important to minimise these possible drawbacks. **At the same time, the introduction of outline bids is a fairer proposal than the three previous options and in our view it is the only option which merits further investigation by the research councils.**

In summary, we believe that the pressures to apply for research council grants are likely to increase as a result of the Government's decision to move to a metrics-based assessment system. Moreover, we feel that the current rise in research council applications stems mainly from pressures to bring in additional income, postdoctoral researchers and PhD students as well as the requirement to boost departmental 'esteem'. Therefore, all four options outlined in the RCUK study deal with the symptoms rather than the causes of increased applications. Such trends reflect the lack of core funds for research and highlight the need for additional funding to enable all academics to meaningfully participate in research and scholarship. In addition, many staff in post 92 institutions feel the research funding game is not worth bothering with, because it appears to be so heavily weighted in favour of a few Russell group universities. We feel the research councils could do more to encourage participation by new academics and from individuals in institutions where there is little tradition of external research funding, for example, via short-term development funds to improve research capability across low-applicant departments.

5. Assessing potential economic impact

Finally, the consultation document asks for views on the proposals to improve the economic impact of the research councils (the so-called Worry report). Proposals include changes to reviewers' training and more explicit guidelines on how to score the economic impact of bids.

The UCU believes that research proposals must continue to be assessed primarily on their scientific or artistic merit. A simplistic notion of 'usable research' can often overlook the fact that what is useful is often neither immediately useful nor recognisable as eventually useful, i.e. theoretical advances often come decades before practical applications are realised. It is important that the introduction of the Worry recommendations do not inadvertently stifle basic or theoretical research.

At the same time, we welcome attempts to identify and widen the potential beneficiaries of research, particularly in the more practically-oriented disciplines. For example, we would like policy-relevant research to be valued, the civic purpose of the university to be affirmed and research-informed teaching to be recognised. However, we are concerned that the Worry report has adopted a narrow, pro-business notion of economic impact. Economic stakeholders should include community groups, voluntary organisations, trade unions and NGOs – and not simply employers. Any research council training courses and policy indicators, therefore, will need to take on board a pluralistic notion of economic activity.

Finally, higher education research has an important role to play in strengthening democratic citizenship, enhancing social inclusion and promoting environmental responsibility. While recognising that this may add to the burden of the peer review process, we would like the research councils to do more to develop their procedures in ways which allow a practical assessment of the social, cultural and democratic benefits of research.

6. General Questions

In recent years there have been a number of useful reforms to the research council system. For example, the use of international reviewers and greater feedback to applicants has improved the representativeness and transparency of the peer review process. At the same time, the RCUK review provides a timely opportunity to further enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of existing peer review processes. We have a number of suggestions in this area.

'Virtual research colleges'

Within the ESRC, the 'virtual research college' is an efficient and effective mechanism for sifting applications and deciding on small grant proposals. Greater use might be made of the 'virtual research college' system in other subject areas and research councils. However, it is important to make sure that the appointment procedures are more transparent than are currently the case.

Improving transparency and representativeness

One of the commonest complaints about the research council system is its apparent conservatism. There is a widespread view that reviewers adopt a policy of 'safety first' – both in terms of the nature of proposals and in favour of 'big name' applicants. For example, although the research councils are doing more to support interdisciplinary research centres and a number have established multidisciplinary peer review committees, there continue to be concerns about the ability of current processes '...to deal with research applications at the boundaries of disciplines'.¹ Such concerns were reflected in the recent UCU consultation on peer review processes. One member stressed:

'...the specific problems in the behavioural sciences with academically uneducated and professional restrictive practices in reviewing and committee feedback on multidisciplinary and interprofessional research proposals and institutional external review'.

Other responses have highlighted the unequal balances of power and authority between different disciplines, such as the bias towards economics within the social sciences, and how the 'differences in relative power between disciplines will usually mean differences in what counts as 'excellent' quality'. Occasionally, there are also suggestions of a systematic favouritism in the review process. One UCU member argued that:

'It is my opinion that there exist "clubs" of academics who mutually support each others' research independent of the quality of the proposed research. Equally, those not in "clubs" are rejected in order to support the club's members'.

It is obviously difficult to prove whether some reviewers are biased in this way. One possible way forward is to reassess the policy of referee anonymity. In fact, we are inclined to agree with the view of one of our UCL members:

'[T]he anonymous privilege of the review system...should be abandoned. The academic system would be fairer, more honest and of benefit all round if reviewers were obliged to state their names'.

There might even be a case for proposals to be reviewed without the names of the candidates on them, since the system otherwise favours those who have already received funding.

Another way to improve the representativeness of the peer review process is to seek a wider pool of reviewers and referees than currently is the case. In addition to international reviewers, the research councils should try to make sure that there is proper representation from across the HE sector, e.g. to include reviewers and referees from post-92 universities, interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary backgrounds and from new or 'emerging' research areas.

The UCU encourages the research councils to examine its procedures on reviewer anonymity and the composition of panels and review teams.

Fixed term contracts

The UCU is extremely disappointed that there is no mention in the RCUK study of the human and economic cost of casualisation. It is not enough simply to express concerns about the impact of proposals on 'early career' researchers - whilst ignoring the thousands of senior and experienced researchers who remain trapped on insecure contracts.² **We call on the RCUK to widen the scope of the current review to include a proper examination of its policies and procedures on the funding as well as assessment of research.** In particular, the RCUK needs to examine the ways in which its procedures could facilitate rather than hinder the permanent employment of research staff on the appropriate academic grade. This includes allowing for:

- a permanent compliment of research staff allocated to projects as bids are won;
- a pool of researchers working on multiple projects at any one time;
- research only academic staff taking on the role of Principal Investigator;
- commitment from the research councils to fund research posts at higher grades – by reference to the national academic role profiles.³

End notes

¹House of Commons Science and Technology Committee (2005) *The Work of Research Councils UK*, Sixth report of session 2004-05, HC 219, p. 32.

²For example, 77.3% of researchers on Research grade II and 60.6% of researchers on Research grade III are on fixed-term contracts. This compares with 93.3% of researchers on grade RA1A (where the majority of 'research only' staff are located) - HESA data 2004-5.

³There is clear evidence that research staff fail to progress from the level 2 research grade (old RA1A) and we believe that part of the problem is that those applying for grants believe that bids requiring funding for more highly graded posts will be turned down on cost grounds – even where there is clear evidence that the project requires more senior posts.