



Frequently Asked Questions: block payment mechanism

The aim of this document is to help clarify some of the major changes which will result from the introduction of the block payment mechanism in October 2010. This FAQ will be updated as common questions from Research Organisations arise.

We are converting our existing studentships and this year's new cohort of students into studentship grants, and this FAQ covers the 2010-11 process. Some additional changes will be implemented for the academic year 2011-12; where possible, we will detail these changes, but in some areas information will not be available until later in the year.

What is the block payment mechanism?

The block payment mechanism is a new way for AHRC to make payments to Research Organisations. Instead of receiving individual payments relating to specific students, Research Organisations will receive aggregated blocks of funding each year covering students' maintenance, tuition fees, etc.

Why is the AHRC introducing the new mechanism?

The system will allow us to introduce a more flexible approach with more autonomy for Research Organisations managing their AHRC postgraduate funding, and will align the AHRC's administrative procedures more closely with those of the other Research Councils.

WHICH STUDENTSHIPS ARE AFFECTED?

Is the new mechanism only for Research Organisations which hold a Block Grant Partnership?

No. The mechanism will be used to pay all AHRC postgraduate studentships, with the exception of Project Students attached to Research Grants. This includes Collaborative Doctoral Awards (CDAs), Studentship Competition awards, and Block Grant Partnership studentships. The new mechanism will also be used for continuing students funded under non-current schemes and competitions, such as those students funded our previous postgraduate Open Competition.

Since the mechanism will not be used for Project Students attached to Research Grants, how will these students be paid?

To fund Project Students, each student's parent Research Grant will be supplemented to the value of the studentship.

Does the mechanism cover Master's and doctoral students?

Yes. The mechanism applies to both Master's-level and doctoral students.

WHAT IS THE STRUCTURE OF THE GRANTS?

What is the duration of the grants?

For the 2010-11 doctoral grants, each grant's start date will be 1st October 2010, and its end date will be equal to the latest AHRC funding end date of a student included in the grant, plus 12 months. For example, if a BGP grant has three doctoral students with end dates of 30th September 2011, 30th September 2012, and 30th September 2013, the end date of that grant will be 30th September 2014. The 2010-11 Master's grants will not have the additional 12 months included. It is likely that your Research Organisation's grants will not all have the same end date.

From October 2011, doctoral studentship grants will last four years (although the funded amount will be equivalent to three years' support and profiled over three years) and Master's grants one year. The doctoral grants are for four years to allow flexibility, for example if a student included in the grant suspends their studies. For studentships with durations longer than the grant it will be possible to move students onto subsequent grants. It is likely that Research Preparation Master's grants will have a duration of 1 year, and Professional Preparation Master's grants 18 months. For example, a two-year Master's student could be funded for a year on one grant and then have their second year funded as part of the next year's grant.

WHAT POLICY CHANGES WILL THERE BE?

What will happen to the nominations process?

After October 2010, the Council will no longer be using a nominations process to recruit students to BGPs, CDAs, or Project Studentships. Instead of submitting nominations to the Council, the Council will be using the Je-S Student Details Portal (SDP), as other Research Councils do, and Research Organisations will enter details of their AHRC-funded students into the SDP. Students recruited to places on the studentship grants must still meet our published eligibility criteria.

What functionality will the Student Details Portal provide?

Research Organisations will be able to use the SDP to update information about their students throughout the duration of their grant, for example if a student were to suspend their award. The Council will no longer be making adjustments to individual awards within grants, and will cease to deal with individual student issues.

How will suspensions/periods of illness be handled under the new mechanism?

Although Research Organisations will have to input details of suspensions and periods of illness into the SDP (see above), the AHRC will no longer require Research Organisations to inform us of these directly to request approval. This should give Research Organisations more autonomy to approve changes to individual studentships within grants. There will still be a requirement for AHRC-funded students to adhere to our published terms and conditions, and there will be a process of ensuring the financial implications of such changes are recorded and reconciled.

Are there any changes to *ad hoc* student payments and entitlements, such as study visits?

There is one important change. For the academic year 2010-11 and beyond, AHRC-funded students will no longer need to apply to the AHRC for funding towards the costs

of conducting study visits or attending conferences. Instead, Research Organisations will receive an annual Research Training Support Grant (RTSG) to spend on the costs of study visits, fieldwork, and conference attendance. The value of the RTSG will be proportional to the number of AHRC-funded doctoral students at your Research Organisation. The RTSG will total £200 per AHRC-funded doctoral student per year, although Research Organisations will have flexibility around how this is spent (i.e. the RTSG funding need not be split equally between all students). There will be further guidance on the RTSG shortly.

Are there any changes to Disabled Student's Allowance (DSA)?

No. As the AHRC now has information about the projected costs for all continuing students with DSA, these amounts will be incorporated into the grants. Where new DSA claims are made, where costs have increased, or where additional support is required beyond that previously identified, Research Organisations can apply for DSA in the normal way and additional funding streams can be added to grants to address any approved DSA claims.

Your announcement mentioned new areas of 'flexibility' for Research Organisations with AHRC awards. What sort of areas does this cover?

The block payment mechanism allows us to provide considerable flexibility in the future. The full range of flexibility measures will be introduced in the academic year 2011-12. From 2011-12, for example, we anticipate allowing Research Organisations to provide 'matched funding', i.e. part-fund a student from an AHRC grant and top-up awards with additional funding from another source such as a grant or a bursary. There will be guidelines about the minimum level of support to be given to AHRC-funded students under these circumstances.

Will there be changes to the AHRC's terms and conditions?

We revise our guidance and terms and conditions annually; as part of this process changes will be made to our terms and conditions of our awards to reflect the new mechanism. One of the biggest changes will be that awards will now be held by the Research Organisation rather than the student.

WHAT FINANCIAL CHANGES WILL THERE BE?

Will the new method of payment affect postgraduate funding levels?

For the academic year 2010/11, we are not anticipating that this new payment mechanism will have any significant impact on the numbers of studentships to be funded through the allocated Block Grant Partnership awards nor to the published predicted number of awards available in the 2010 Studentship Competition. We cannot at this stage make firm commitments about detailed funding levels beyond 2010/11, as these may be subject to budget or spending review decisions.

What types of funding will the new grants include?

Each of the grants is split up into a variety of fund headings. Research Organisations will be provided with financial totals for each fund heading for the grant. The fund heading types include:

- Maintenance
- Tuition Fees

- Disabled Students Allowance
- 'Roberts' funding
- Research Training Support Grant

How are the payments aggregated and totalled?

The AHRC will use its existing payment records for students as the basis for calculating the value of the grants starting in academic year 2010-11. The existing funding headings we use will be mapped onto the new headings.

When will payments be made?

All payments, irrespective of the fund heading, will be paid to Research Organisations quarterly in advance. This includes tuition fees, which are not currently paid quarterly, and RTSG. Research Organisations will need to complete a start confirmation for each of their grants, in a process similar to that used for post-doctoral research grants, before payments will be made. The start confirmation cannot be submitted until after 1st October and therefore the first payment on the grant will be in arrears. The onus will be on Research Organisations to submit their start confirmations promptly.

What happens if we underspend on one of our grants?

There will be a reconciliation process at the end of each grant during which any unspent funds will be reclaimed by the AHRC. This reconciliation will take place at the fund heading level and therefore Research Organisations will not be permitted to vire funds between different fund headings. The AHRC will provide further information about the reconciliation process as soon as it is available.

Will we receive full award costs even for fees-only studentships?

The amount of funding paid within each grant will relate to the usual costs of that studentship, so fees-only students will not receive maintenance funding. For example, the grant for an organisation whose AHRC-funded students were all fees-only would include no funds for maintenance; if all of those fees-only students were studying part-time, the grant would include fees at the part-time rate only.

From the academic year 2011-12, as we will not have the nominations process, we will not be able to set up grants on the basis of actual costs for each student. The arrangements for calculating the total grant due to each Research Organisation in 2011-12 will therefore be different. Full details of this will be announced shortly.

Will our Research Organisation be able to decide which students to support with its AHRC studentship grants?

The grants starting in the academic year 2010-11 will be calculated on the basis of known new and continuing students, and as such the funding from these grants must go towards these named students.

The situation for grants beginning in the academic year 2011-12 will be slightly different in line with the additional flexibility the Council will be providing. The AHRC will continue to publish guides on recruitment and selection and these must be adhered to in nominating a student to receive AHRC funding.

Can we commit RTSG funds before the start of the grant?

We recognise that there will be doctoral students that we are currently supporting, i.e. that are going into their second or third year of study, who will be undertaking visits early in the 2010-11 academic year who will wish to purchase tickets prior to the new

grant commencing. As an exceptional, interim arrangement, acknowledging the change in mechanism for support, Research Organisations will be permitted to commit RTSG funding ahead of the grant starting. This only applies for costs of visits or conferences that fall within the terms and conditions, which take place after 1 October 2010, and are for students supported on that grant, i.e. that are a legitimate charge on the new grant. If you need to purchase tickets between now and 30th September 2010, please contact Sam Lambshead (s.lambshead@ahrc.ac.uk), who can approve the expenditure and make a note against the relevant grant. It is essential that you obtain this approval from AHRC. If there is expenditure prior to the start of the grant which is not approved, we will reclaim these costs at reconciliation. If you have any questions concerning this, please contact Sam.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Where can I get more help with this?

We ran workshops in late June to help explain these changes more fully. You can also contact Ben Spratt (b.spratt@ahrc.ac.uk) if you would like any further information.