

Responses to the Postgraduate Review Working Group's final report

Introduction

1. The AHRC received a total of **116** responses to the working group's consultation report. This consisted of **87** responses from a varied mix of institutions across the UK, and **29** subject associations and learned societies. A full list of respondents is given at the end of this report. The AHRC asked institutions and other relevant organisations to comment on this report during a consultation period that began in early October and ended on 3 November 2006. All AHRC contacts were e-mailed in July to inform them that the period for consultation would be in October, and again in October when the report was published on the AHRC's website. Interested parties were invited to comment through the co-ordination of their Vice-Chancellor or head of organisation. To ensure as many organisations as possible were aware of the report a variety of different mailing lists were used, contacting Vice-Chancellors, Pro Vice-Chancellors, Deans, Heads of Departments and registry contacts in institutions across the UK, Heads of subject associations, relevant employer groups, postgraduate panel members, and the attendees of the 15 June consultation event.

Summary of responses from institutions

2. Given the scale of the changes proposed, the responses from HEIs show an extremely encouraging level of support, with **86%** of HEIs being either in favour of the new system or neutral. The responses received were mixed, though a number of issues did reoccur, as will be detailed in this report. Of the **60%** of respondents who expressed support for the proposed scheme, many noted that it would have a positive effect on the arts and humanities disciplines within their institution.
3. **26%** of HEIs did not express a strong opinion either way, though most of these engaged constructively with the questions on how they would go about implementing the scheme in their institution, some expressing concerns or requesting clarification about how the scheme would work in practice for their institution. **14%** of HEIs expressed strong reservations with the proposed scheme, and urged the AHRC either to reconsider implementing the scheme, or to reconsider the mechanisms of the scheme as currently detailed. Some of these reservations can easily be addressed, as the working group has already given some thought to the issues.
4. The responses received from institutions were particularly varied as there was no typical response from different types of institutions. There was a variety of responses from smaller and/or newer institutions: some of these institutions were in favour of the scheme as they saw it as an opportunity to perhaps access a higher level of funding than previously achieved, and to build up certain areas/departments within these institutions. Others in this group had concerns that they did not have an established track record which they thought would be needed to compete in the scheme with larger and more traditional institutions. Responses from larger and more well-established institutions were also mixed: some of these respondents were in favour of the scheme as they welcomed the stability and ability to plan a 5-year term of funding would bring, whilst others thought a 5-year term would be overly static and would not allow them to respond to developments in their institutions. A number of these respondents commented that the scheme would lessen the administrative burden currently incurred in applying to the open competition, whilst other respondents thought

that the scheme represented the AHRC devolving the administrative burden to institutions.

Summary of responses from subject associations

5. The responses received from subject associations and learned societies were much more typical, with most of these respondents concerned with the possible effect the BGP scheme would have on their particular subject area. These comments are again discussed in more detail further on in this report. Within this group of respondents, **55% were in favour or neutral**. **17%** expressed support for the proposed scheme, **38%** did not express a strong opinion either way (though a number had concerns with how the scheme would operate in practice), and **45%** expressed strong reservations.

Overall summary

6. Considering all the responses received, **78%** are in favour (49%) or neutral (29%), and **22%** are against the proposed scheme. This is a very welcome level of support for the proposed changes, and contrasts with the finding of the doctoral working group in 2005, which showed opinions on the current competition were much closer to a 50/50 division. The constructive comments and questions posed by those respondents to the current consultation who do have concerns are also welcome, and will be helpful in guiding AHRC staff in putting together further details about the scheme and working with institutions to introduce the new system.

Format of responses

7. To direct the respondents to comment constructively on the proposed scheme, pro-formas were sent out to Vice-Chancellors' offices detailing specific questions (as detailed below and in section 7 of the report). Most respondents did use these pro-formas in returning their comments. A number of the respondents who appeared in opposition to the scheme commented that the consultation appeared to focus on the implementation of the scheme and not the principle of what is proposed, giving the impression that the introduction of the scheme had already been decided on. Most of these respondents choose to give their comments in a covering letter or e-mail, rather than addressing the questions in the pro-forma. A tailored version of the pro-forma was sent to subject associations, but as many of these respondents thought the questions were more applicable to institutions, they chose to return comments in a separate document.

Question 1: How would a BGP be formulated in your institution?

8. Respondents gave a number of different examples of how they would co-ordinate this, but some common themes emerged. **26%** of respondents said they would form such a bid collaboratively between the relevant departments/schools. **62%** commented they would either establish a dedicated committee for this purpose, or use an existing committee or group (with most involving consultation with the relevant departments), with **17%** of respondents saying such a group would ask for bids or applications from relevant departments before formulating a BGP bid. **32%** of respondents said they would ensure a BGP bid represented and supported the institution's or relevant faculties' long-term strategies. Only a few institutions commented that they would assess how they could use BGP funding to also engage with the AHRC's goals for postgraduate funding. When discussing central co-ordination of a bid and engaging with an overarching strategy, there was a mixture in the responses of this occurring at institutional level, and at Faculty/Graduate School level. A few institutions commented that

their bid would be likely to try and identify existing strengths within the institution or relevant departments, whilst only one respondent commented in this section that they would seek to identify areas that needed building capacity. No subject associations responded to this question.

9. Example of a response detailing a coherent allocation strategy:

“The BGP would be formulated at Executive level within the institution’s Strategic Planning process initially, to ensure forward planning for the full five year cycle of both the BGP and the institutional Strategic Plan. This would enable the institution, taking academic planning and projected postgraduate numbers in the round, to consider such factors as: the balance of doctoral, research masters and taught masters places; growth in demand in specific subject areas; new and emerging areas of postgraduate study linked to research activity and research centres. This would also involve such longer-term strategic issues as Estates planning, financial planning and HR. The BGP would be formulated through discussions involving the Deputy Director and Director of Academic Planning, the Head of Research and Postgraduate Studies, and Heads of Academic Schools, to ensure a strategically considered and balanced portfolio of postgraduate programmes meeting customer, internal and external needs.”

Question 2: Does your institution have an existing strategy for postgraduate research and training in the arts and humanities that it could detail in a bid for BGP funding?

10. In answering this question, **56%** of respondents identified the postgraduate training provision they have in place for their arts and humanities students, stating they would replicate the information already provided for the AHRC in the Research Training Statements. **55%** of respondents stated they did have an institutional or faculty level overarching strategy that they could use in formulating a bid for BGP funding. **10%** of respondents said they would need to formulate a long-term strategy expressly for this purpose, and in this section, **5%** of respondents said they had certain areas they would wish to use the BGP funding to strengthen. No subject associations commented on this section.

Question 3: Would you prefer to bid for a sum of funding to be translated into specified award numbers or to bid for a number of awards at a fixed unit cost?

11. Where respondents answered this question **46%** said they would favour a sum of funding and **36%** favoured bidding for a number of awards. A number of respondents did not respond to this question, stating they were not sure of the implications of either, but that they would welcome whichever option allowed institutions the most flexibility. Many of the respondents who were in favour of the sum of funding stated this was because this option appeared more flexible, and would allow institutions to augment funding to create a larger number of awards, or to vary funding levels according to the needs of particular projects or students, particularly part-time students. Those in favour of bidding for a number of awards stated it would better aid forward planning, would be easier to administer within institutions, and would be a fairer system for students across all institutions. **7%** of subject associations (this represents 2 associations) responded to this question, stating that in their view institutions should bid for a number of awards.

Question 4: What would be the advantages to your institution of applying for up to 5 years' funding as compared to the current annual competition system?

12. The majority of institutional respondents did see some benefits of a scheme offering 5 years' of funding, though a lesser proportion of subject associations agreed with these points. The main advantages raised were firstly the opportunity to plan over a longer-term and to formulate a strategy over this period. **72%** of institutional respondents saw this as an advantage, and **28%** of subject associations also commented on this. **37%** of institutions also commented that this system would offer stability over this period, and **17%** of subject associations agreed with this. **32%** of institutions commented that funding guaranteed over a 5-year period would allow them to recruit high-quality students more easily, or to respond quickly to high-quality students who approached them or were already based in the institution; only **3%** of subject associations also raised this point. **21%** of institutional respondents and **10%** of subject associations saw the new system as more efficient in terms of time spent in administration. Some respondents did identify disadvantages to a 5-year term of funding, mainly as detailed in paragraphs 15 to 19, and stated a 3-year term would be preferable.

Question 5: Would the BGP work more effectively if some flexibility were allowed to institutions once awarded? What would be the extent of any changes your institution might wish to make to the proposed distribution of awards?

13. The majority of institutional respondents commented that flexibility is definitely needed, with some respondents seeing it as integral to the effectiveness of the scheme. The flexibility needed focussed around two main themes. Firstly the need to reallocate studentships within an institution, either because of students withdrawing from a course, or because of a lack of suitable or high-quality students in a particular area or department. **46%** of institutions raised this issue, with **17%** of subject associations agreeing. Secondly, institutions stated flexibility would be required to respond to changes within individual institutions. Examples given were changes in staff, new Master's courses being developed, new areas emerging for development, and new priorities emerging in subject areas. **61%** of institutions and **21%** of subject associations commented on this.
14. A few respondents stated that although some flexibility was needed, they would not be comfortable with a system that allowed institutions to reallocate funding without approval from the AHRC. They saw a danger in this in continuing the potential 'in-fighting' amongst departments beyond the awarding period, stating some larger departments would use this flexibility to 'play the system' and take awards away from smaller departments. A few other respondents stated that the AHRC should allow a tolerance level of reallocation, perhaps allowing a certain percentage of awarded funding (10 or 20%) to be reallocated without its prior approval.

Question 6: Do you foresee any issues with the implementation of BGP funding in your institution and/or the sector?

15. Responses to this question were wide-ranging but again a few common issues did emerge. As responses to the report that did not address the pro-forma's

questions could also be seen as answers to this question, all such separate comments will be detailed below.

Smaller, less popular, or emerging subject areas/departments may be disadvantaged

16. This was the issue raised by most respondents, with **26%** of institutional respondents commenting on this, and **59%** of subject associations raising this issue. Many institutions were concerned that smaller departments with a low critical mass of researchers, or newer departments with an unproven track record, would have difficulty in competing for institutional allocation against larger and more well-established departments.
17. This was a particular issue for subject associations with many stating they could see problems in the proposed system for their particular subject area.
18. Many arts-based associations and institutions, and those involved with interdisciplinary projects, also stated they thought the system would benefit more traditional subjects within institutions. Some of the newer or less well-established institutions commented that it would be harder for them to access funding as they do not have a proven track-record or evidence base to submit for assessment. A few respondents also noted a lack of detail in the report in regards to how professional courses should be incorporated, and raised concern that these courses could be marginalised in the BGP system.

How can fair internal allocation be ensured?

19. Many respondents commented that they could see difficulties in establishing fair and transparent allocation procedures within institutions that would please every subject area. **20%** of institutions commented on this. This was also a prevalent issue for subject associations with **52%** of these respondents raising this issue. A few of these respondents saw it as such a serious issue they commented it could create a divisive atmosphere within institutions that would last beyond the term of a BGP.

Other issues raised by respondents

20. Other issues raised can be grouped as follows:
 - i. **Increasing administration for institutions.** A number of respondents commented that the system represented increased administration for institutions, in terms of putting an initial bid together, advertising studentships, and administering the funding. **25%** of institutions and **21%** of subject associations raised this issue. A few respondents questioned if the envisaged administration savings made by the AHRC would be translated into increased funding, and also if extra funds would be made available to institutions to cover these costs.
 - ii. **Potential lock-out of institutions/departments.** **16%** of institutions and **10%** of subject associations were concerned by the implication that a BGP competition may only run every 5 years. They saw this as detrimental to the institutions that would only be able to access limited funds through the open competition in this time, and to the departments not included in a BGP bid.
 - iii. **Loss of peer-review.** **10%** of institutions and **31%** of subject associations commented on this as a problem with the proposed system. The current peer-review system was seen as valuable for the national overview it provides across all subject areas, with respondents asking how

- this could be achieved with the BGP scheme, and for its assessment of applications by subject specialists.
- iv. **Increased student applications.** 10% of institutions and 3% of subject associations raised this issue, stating that currently students are required to submit one application through one institution for funding to the AHRC. Under the proposed system there is nothing to prevent students applying for studentships at all the institutions who hold BGPs in their subject of study, increasing the administration for institutions and making internal competitions problematic. Respondents stated that the AHRC should provide guidelines on this, and perhaps publish an agreed deadline for internal competitions to unify the process. A number of the respondents who appeared strongly opposed to the proposed system stated that no consideration had been given in the report to how students would interact with the system.
 - v. **Departments not included within a BGP bid should be allowed to access the open competition.** 9% of institutions and 7% of subject associations raised this issue, stating that in order to ensure isolated pockets of excellence are not locked-out of the system, they should be able to apply to the open competition. It should also be noted that many respondents assumed this was already the case or sought clarification on this point. It could be assumed the working group's recommendation on this point was not made clear in the report and that other respondents may otherwise have commented.
 - vi. **Research will be driven by institutional agendas, and not by individual students' proposals.** 8% of institutions and 14% of subject associations commented on this issue, expressing concern that students would have to follow pre-planned areas of research instead of approaching institutions/potential supervisors with their own interests. The majority of institutional respondents did appear to accept the report's suggestion that the level of detail required in a BGP bid would still allow students to approach supervisors with their own proposals.
 - vii. **How will bids be assessed, all or nothing?** 7% of institutions and 3% of subject associations sought clarification on this matter, stating it was unclear if the AHRC thought elements of a bid were unsound, whether it would negotiate with institutions, or refuse the bid altogether. Respondents stated further guidance on this would be welcome, as it would affect the risks an institution may take in its bid.

21. This summarises the main concerns raised though there were also a number of respondents who raised issues individual to their institution. Other issues raised by a few institutions were: potential over-bidding by large institutions and how this would be prevented, risk of limiting equal opportunities for students, and the need for appropriate assessment for large and small institutions. A few respondents commented that the proposed timetable meant that no consideration could be given to the 2008 RAE results which was problematic, whilst one respondent commented it was a positive step that RAE results would not be a dominant metric in assessment.

Question 7: Do you have any suggestions for improvement to the model that would be beneficial for your institution and/or the sector?

22. Responses to this question can be summarised as follows:

- i. **The open competition should operate with a higher percentage of funding.** A number of respondents stated that the proportion of funding

left to the open competition was too low, and that more funding should operate through this competition in order that isolated pockets of excellence could access it, either indefinitely, or to be more gradually phased into the BGP scheme. **17%** of institutions and **17%** of subject associations made this suggestion. A few institutions did respond that the proportion of funding left to the open competition was too high.

- ii. **The scheme should operate for the first few years as a trial run.** Some respondents thought that the scheme should only be provisionally introduced for a few years, and perhaps for a shorter term than originally envisaged, in order that a review could take place to monitor the effectiveness of the scheme and any adverse effects on subject spread, geographical spread of funding and so on. **9%** of institutions and **7%** of subject associations made this suggestion.
- iii. **An element of ring-fencing should be retained.** **8%** of institutions and **14%** of subject associations commented that some form of ring-fencing should continue in order to ensure smaller, endangered, or emerging subjects are protected.
- iv. **Bids should be made at departmental level.** **2%** of institutions and **17%** of subject associations thought that bids should come from departments rather than institutions. This suggestion, made mainly by subject associations, centres around concerns that an institutional level bid would not fairly allocate funding across all relevant arts and humanities disciplines in that institution.

23. Another suggestion made by a few institutions is that a BGP award should include a development fund, or a number of development awards, that could be used by institutions to either build capacity in certain areas, or to respond to innovative research proposals that were not originally detailed in the BGP bid.

Proposed timetable

24. In terms of the proposed timetable for the implementation of the BGP scheme, most respondents did not refer to this at all. A few respondents commented that they were pleased the proposed timetable gave institutions time to engage with the scheme and formulate bids; one respondent commented that the timetable did not give institutions enough time to formulate bids; and one respondent commented that the timetable should be brought forward a year.

Question 8: Would you consider collaborating with another institution to put forward a collaborative BGP bid to the AHRC. If so would this build on a partnership that already operates?

25. **7%** of institutions replied to this question stating they would consider developing collaboration as part of a BGP bid, or would consider developing an entirely collaborative bid. **28%** of institutions and **3%** of subject associations stated they could build on existing collaborations as part of a BGP bid, only a few of these respondents stated they would consider putting forward an entirely collaborative bid based on existing partnerships. A few institutions commented that they would welcome guidance on what would be acceptable types and levels of collaborations within bids, as some institutions may be nervous in submitting more 'adventurous' bids that will be assessed against 'traditional' bids.

Appendix 1: Respondents to the consultation report

Bournemouth University
Canterbury Christ Church University
Cardiff University
City University
Coventry University
Durham University
Edinburgh College of Art
Glasgow Caledonian University
Glasgow School of Art
Goldsmiths College
Institute for Education
Keele University
King's College London
Kingston University
Lancaster University
Leeds Metropolitan University
Liverpool John Moores University
Loughborough University
London School of Economics
Manchester Metropolitan University
Nottingham Trent University
Open University
Queen Margaret University College
Queen Mary, University of London
Queen's University Belfast
Robert Gordon University
Roehampton University
Royal Academy of Music
Royal Holloway
Royal Northern College of Music
School of Advanced Study
Sheffield Hallam University
SOAS
St Martin's College
University College for the Creative Arts
University College London
University of Aberdeen
University of Bath
University of Bedfordshire
University of Birmingham
University of Bradford
University of Brighton
University of Cambridge
University of Central England
University of Central Lancashire
University of Dundee
University of East Anglia
University of East London
University of Edinburgh
University of Essex
University of Glasgow

Appendix 1 continued: Respondents to the consultation report

University of Greenwich
University of Hertfordshire
University of Huddersfield
University of Hull
University of Kent
University of Leeds
University of Leicester
University of Manchester
University of Newcastle
University of Northampton
University of Nottingham
University of Oxford
University of Plymouth
University of Reading
University of Salford
University of Sheffield
University of Southampton
University of St Andrews
University of Stirling
University of Strathclyde
University of Surrey
University of Sussex
University of Teeside
University of the Arts
University of Ulster
University of Wales, Aberystwyth
University of Wales, Bangor
University of Wales, Lampeter
University of Wales, Newport
University of Warwick
University of Winchester
University of Wolverhampton
University of Worcester
University of York
University of the West of England
Association for Environmental Archaeology
Association of Social Anthropologists
Association of University Departments of Theology and Religious Studies
Association of University Professors and Heads of French
British Association for Information and Library Education and Research
British Association for Slavonic and East European Studies
Board of Celtic Studies (Scotland)
British Association for American Studies
British Association for Canadian Studies
British Philosophical Association
British Society for the History of Science
British Society for the Philosophy of Science
Council for College and University English
Council of University Classical Departments
English Association
Forum for Archives and Record Management Education and Research

Appendix 1 continued: Respondents to the consultation report

MeCCSA with AMPE
Mind Association
Museums Association
National Association for Music in Higher Education
Royal Geographical Society
Royal Historical Society
Scots Philosophical Club
Social History Society
Society for French Studies
Society for Latin American Studies
Society for the Study of French History
Society of Legal Scholars
The Philological Society
British Academy