



Executive Summary - Postgraduate Funding Review Regional Consultation Events, 2007

Between April and July 2007 the AHRC held a series of regional consultation events relating to the recommendations of the review of postgraduate funding mechanisms. The aim of these events was to gain feedback from the community on the issues raised by the new competitions, so these could be fed in to the implementation phase of the PG review.

Presentations were given by senior staff and AHRC committee members explaining the history of the review and the new competitions, designed in light of the working group's recommendations. Delegates were given the opportunity to ask questions after the presentations given by AHRC staff and raise any further concerns in the afternoon breakout sessions.

The overall reception to the new schemes was positive, with delegates being in favour of the move towards encouraging strategic thinking within arts and humanities faculties and away from a 'one-size fits all' approach to postgraduate funding. Full records of the issues raised at each individual event are appended to this document, and these have been circulated to and considered by the Postgraduate committee in their discussions.

Three main overarching concerns were raised at the meeting:

- Concern was expressed that having 2 competitions could result in a two-tier system. The AHRC affirms that both competitions are of equal value. The eligibility threshold to the Block Grant Partnership (BGP) competition is based on award numbers with the intention of ensuring the BGP awards constitute a block of funding, and is in no way an indicator of quality of institution. Student recruitment to both competitions will be run nationally and will only make awards to the very best students. AHRC data shows that of the applicants for the 2006 open competition, 54% had 1st class honours degree. As the Open Competition has an overall success rate of 26% of applicants, it is apparent that there is in fact a surplus of talented and qualified students who will apply to both schemes. It was noted that it is important HEI's understand and reflect the equal status of the two new competitions;
- There was also concern relating to student recruitment, in particular that recruitment to BGP places would impact on the studentship competition which AHRC agreed should be avoided;
- Issues were raised about how the second round of the BGP competition would be run and how HEI's could access the 2nd round. AHRC stated that the basis of the 2nd round would be different as it could not be based on previous awards in the Open Competition. It was also noted that the studentship scheme, CDA scheme and project studentships all allow HEI's to make gains year on year in terms of numbers of AHRC award holders in order to facilitate capacity building within non-BGP institutions.

Reponses to many of the issues raised are contained in the FAQ's document:

http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/files/university_staff_files/postgraduate/pg_funding_faqs.asp

Appendix

Issues arising from the regional event, Manchester, 27th April 2007

Issue: Concern that if a lot of HEIs chose to make a collaborative if the 80/20 funding split would not be sufficient for the BGP scheme

Issue: Concern over lack of guidance for collaborative bids and potential for such bids to entail a higher workload. It was suggested that the deadline for collaborative bids be extended

Issue: Concern that those HEIs with 8 or more awards would be forced to enter the BGP scheme

Issue: Concern that HEIs would use all of their award allocation in year 1

Issue: Concern that HEIs would lose awards if they could not find students to fill the allocation

Issue: Concern over student drop out and its effect on awards both during the nomination process and post-award

Issue: Concern over the cap on the Open Competition

Issue: Concern was raised over the likelihood of students making multiple applications for BGP assisted places and not taking up places offered to them. It was suggested the AHRC could implement a system similar to UCAS

Issue: What criteria will the AHRC apply for the recruitment of students?

Issue: It was suggested that the new schemes offer incentives for PPM and part-time students to attempt to combat the higher drop-out rates

Issue: Will HEIs be offered the opportunity to apply for studentships in relation to the AHRC's strategic initiatives rather than by subject area

Issue: Concern over how interdisciplinarity will be accommodated

Issue: It was suggested that the AHRC could run an interim exercise half way through the first phase for HEIs which may have passed the threshold requirements after subsequent rounds of the open competition. It was indicated that the ESRC currently have an interim stage.

Issue: Concern over the length of time of the BGPs. It was felt that this was an extremely long time in relation to potential changes both within the sector and individual HEIs

Issue: Concern over how emergent and endangered subject areas would both be identified and how support of these would be ensured through the new scheme.

Issue: Concern that the new schemes replicate sector-wide inequalities and create a two-tier system

Issue: Concern over the impact of the BGP scheme on other AHRC studentship schemes i.e. LBAS

Issue: Concern that it would be difficult for BGP HEIs to build capacity between BGP rounds

Issue: Concern over the effect of internal politics on allocation of BGP awards at institutional level

Issue: Concern over how a BGP would be judged as successful at the end of award

Issue: Concern over potential for AHRC to micro-manage award allocation

Issue: Delegates felt it was important to ensure the application process retained an element of dialogue or negotiation similar to process used at the DFG in Germany

Issue: Concern over whether HEIs would be discouraged from offering awards to international or part-time students

Issue: Concern over Master/PhD spread of awards

Issue: Concern that data used to judge BGP bids would only be AHRC data i.e. submission rates, award numbers

Issue: It was felt that the schemes do not interrelate with each other and that the AHRC needed to ensure there was a relationship between the two schemes

Issue: It was felt that by retaining an element of open competition it would ensure that students could still set emphasis within the sector and produce innovative research

Issue: Concern over the tension between top-down strategic initiative and the priorities at the 'coal-face'

Issue: Concern over the potential disincentive for HEIs to fund Doctoral students who have self-funded for first 1 or 2 years.

Issue: Concern was raised that the open competition would be given the left over subject allocation from the BGP scheme

Assessment Criteria - Delegates were also encouraged to discuss the assessment criteria. The main criticism of the assessment criteria was that they were too generic, static and familiar and didn't indicate how the AHRC would differentiate between applications.

Issue: Delegates wanted clarification on how the different areas would be weighted as it was felt the vast majority of applications would tick all the relevant boxes.

Issue: It was felt that the supporting statement would lead to HEIs 'story-telling' in their applications

Appendix B

Issues arising from the regional event, Edinburgh, 4th June 2007

Issue: Concern that decision would be made regarding BGP bids before new RAE scores are released

Issue: Concern that Open Competition capping will amount to a lock-out from the BGP scheme for certain HEIs

Issue: Concern regarding the impact of departmental BGP lock-out on opportunities for disabled and mature students

Issue: Delegates felt that the AHRC should consider an increase in student stipends to encourage study in endangered subject areas

Issue: How will endangered subject areas be identified?

Issue: How will collaborative bids differ from individual HEI bids?

Issue: Will collaborations have to pre-exist the bid or can new ones be formed in order to access the scheme?

Issue: Could collaborative bids be made in relation to subject disciplines rather than HEIs?

Issue: How can HEIs who are not able to bid in the 1st round ensure they can access the 2nd round? Will the assessment process differ?

Issue: It was felt that all awards at HEIs from all sources (i.e. other research councils) should be taken into consideration when assessing threshold eligibility for a BGP bid

Issue: Concern was raised over the likelihood of students making multiple applications for BGP assisted places and not taking up places offered to them. It was suggested the AHRC could implement a system similar to UCAS

Issue: Concern was raised that the schemes would further perpetuate the stability of the current funding patterns

Issue: Some delegates from Scottish HEIs felt that because of the traditionally lower numbers of award holders in Scotland due to 4 year undergraduate courses, the BGP threshold should be lower for Scottish HEIs

Issue: Concern was raised over how the success of BGP holding HEIs will be judged as many PhD submissions won't have been made by the 2nd round

Issue: Concern was raised over why decision making regarding student transfers, suspension of studies and extension of submission dates would be retained by the AHRC.

Issue: Delegates were unsure whether they could offer awards on a 1+3 basis or whether students holding BGPs for Masters course would still have to reapply for doctoral funding

Issue: Delegates were unsure whether Scottish HEIs could offer doctoral awards to applicants with a Scottish Master's

Issue: Concern was raised over the implications of an open competition award holder transferring to a BGP holding HEI and vice-versa

Issue: Concern was raised over the potential loss of student led projects

Issue: Concern was raised that bids will be made in relation to subject disciplines not subject specialisms

Issue: Concern was raised over student recruitment. It was felt that the administrative burden would be passed to HEIs due to the inevitable interviewing and ranking of applicants

Issue: Concern was raised over the potential for localisation of the market in specialist subjects e.g. Scottish history

Issue: Concern was raised over the effect of internal politics on allocation of awards within HEIs

Issue: Delegates felt it was of utmost importance to retain an element of dialogue between the AHRC and HEIs during the BGP application process

Issue: Concern was raised over the insurance of the maintenance of health of disciplines. It was suggested that the annual health of disciplines report be made available to HEIs during the application stage of both schemes

Issue: Concern was raised over how HEIs will put together a BGP bid

Issue: Concern was raised over the measurement of practice-led research outputs as it was felt that employability would be a more relevant indicator of student success rather than more traditional research based outputs

Issue: Concern was raised over whether the BGP scheme would lead to the AHRC micro-managing award allocation in HEIs

Issue: Concern was raised that the BGP scheme may produce a narrowing of disciplines if subject allocation was not monitored properly

Issue: It was felt that the BGP could facilitate the encouragement of HEI support of early career researchers

Issue: It was felt that interdisciplinarity needs to be actively encouraged through the scheme

Issue: Concern was raised over what would happen if a BGP HEI restructured half way through the first phase

Issue: It was suggested that the AHRC could run an interim exercise half way through the first phase for HEIs which may have passed the threshold requirements after subsequent rounds of the open competition

Assessment Criteria - Delegates were also encouraged to discuss the assessment criteria. Below are the main issues that arose.

Issue: Assessment criteria were felt to be too process orientated with too much emphasis on training provisions. It was felt this was inadequate as a criterion to differentiate between applications

Issue: Delegates disliked the use of the word coherence in the criteria in terms of HEI strategy. What criteria would be used to assess this? Is it just in terms of AHRC interests?

Issue: Delegates felt that HEIs should be asked about what is both *emerging* and distinctive about their strategy to discourage a solely top-down approach

Issue: p.7 of the criteria – it was felt there was slippage between the generic and subject specific provision

Issue: Some delegates felt criteria C3 relating to practice led research provisions was not necessary

Issue: It was felt that criteria 1 & 2 force HEIs to look at their postgraduate strategies and could cause a positive sea change, encouraging HEIs to be more future facing

Issue: Concern was raised that the assessment process was 'unscientific'

Issue: It was felt that it was likely that the supporting statement element would lead to HEIs 'story-telling' in their applications

Issue: It was felt that clarification would be needed as to what evidence could be used to show a researcher is high-quality in relation to criteria 5

Appendix C

Issues arising from the regional event, London, 22nd June 2007

Issue: Concern was raised over the 80/20% funding split

Issue: Concern was raised that implementing the application process in HEIs would require another level of administrative staff

Issue: Questions were raised over how the strategic priorities were decided upon

Issue: Concern was raised over the prospect of multiple applications being made by students for BGP assisted places

Issue: Concern was raised over how decisions would be reached by committee when allocating awards for emergent subject areas as these were unlikely to have a proven track record.

Issue: Concern was raised over what would happen to HEIs who were unsuccessful in the BGP scheme

Issue: Clarification was requested as to the status of subjects who were not allocated awards in a successful BGP bid and whether they could enter the studentship competition.

Issue: Concern was raised that the new schemes presented the possibility of demotion for those HEIs who are unsuccessful in their BGP application

Issue: Questions were raised over how the success of the first round of BGPs will be evaluated

Issue: Concern was raised over the lack of awareness the AHRC will have for departments which may not have previously entered the open competition. How will their allocation be judged and how will we know of departments left out of a bid?

Issue: Concern was raised that core arts and humanities subjects may miss out on awards because of the inclusion of occasional award holding subjects.

Issue: Clarification was sought over how the distribution of awards would be divided between the two schemes and whether the 50/50 split between MA and Doctoral was at HEI or national level.

Issue: Concern was raised over the requirement for students to apply using different application forms for BGP places. Clarification was sought that HEIs could use existing mechanisms to recruit students. It was also suggested the AHRC produce a standardised form for student applications.

Issue: Clarification was sought over the rationale behind why the AHRC had set a threshold for accessing the BGP scheme and why all HEIs could access it

Issue: Clarification was sought over the flexibility of award allocation within HEIs – i.e. could a year 1 award be reallocated to year 2 if no suitable candidate applied for the place.

Issue: Concern was raised over what the expectation was for departments which currently get occasional awards, for example 2 every 5 years. Would these departments still be able to apply for occasional awards or must they put in for an annual allocation?

Issue: Clarification was sought over how the AHRC required collaborations to work, in particular whether a collaborative bid should be made on the grounds of HEIs having similar strengths or complimentary strengths

Issue: Concern was raised over how awards could be bid for and allocated for interdisciplinary studies. It was suggested that HEIs apply under an interdisciplinary category and the AHRC provide a quota of awards for these bids.

Issue: Concern was raised over how the mapping of awards would be done

Issue: Concern was raised over the subject classifications

Issue: Clarification was sought over what the relationship should be between a HEI's strategy and the AHRC's strategy.

Issue: It was requested that the AHRC produce a definition of 'research strategy'

Issue: Concern was raised over the equal opportunities rights of fees only and part-time students.

Issue: Questions were raised over the rationale for not allowing departments who don't hold BGP awards to apply to the studentship competition

Issue: Concern was raised that the AHRC would ensure communications regarding the new schemes were sent to the right contact

Issue: Concern was raised over why the AHRC's other post-graduate funding schemes were not included in the threshold data.

Issue: Clarification was sought over the implications of a BGP student transferring to another HEI

Appendix D
AHRC Regional Event – Bath Spa 24th July 2007
Issues arising

Issue: Will the AHRC be moving all its processes to the HEIs as the ESRC have?

Issue: How will the nomination process work?

Issue: Why do you need nominations early in the year, why can't HEIs provide this information at a later date as they do for some other Councils?

Issue: Multiple applications from students will increase the workload for HEIs. How will AHRC prevent these?

Issue: Why do you think the new system will increase student mobility?

Issue: With doctoral awards in the BGP scheme will HEIs be able to fund mature students or students who may be in their 2nd or 3rd year of their doctorate?

Issue: Will the AHRC be flexible over how funding can be used, so that if they fund the 2nd and 3rd years of a doctoral award the HEI can then use the additional year(s) money somewhere else, for example 1 year of someone's doctorate or a master's award.

Issue: Will HEIs be able to award 1+3 awards?

Issue: How will the AHRC ensure that excellent students are selected?

Issue: There is a lot of wasted effort in the current open competition and the forms are very complicated, will these be simplified and the process less burdensome on HEIs in the new Studentship competition?

Issue: Will the submission rate survey penalties still apply?

Issue: Can an HEI claim for advertising and running costs for the BGPs?

Issue: Is the 80/20 split set in stone or will it be revisited, for example if the eligibility for the BGP competition means that historically 90% of awards have gone to the HEIs eligible to enter that BGP competition but only 80% of the funding is available to them?

Issue: Why is the AHRC insistent on protecting 20% of the awards for the Studentship competition?

Issue: Why can't all HEIs be eligible to enter the BGP competition?

Issue: Are Project Students included in BGPs?

Issue: Do BGP applications have to relate to the broader aims of the AHRC (e.g. Identities and Culture, Heritage etc) as this will be easier for some subject areas than others?

Issue: How will collaborative BGP bids work?

Issue: The 5 year period seems too long to set funding patterns in stone based on historical data, why haven't you followed the other Research Councils example of running block funding over 3 years?

Issue: Why hasn't the AHRC adopted the NERC's Masters Training Grant model with regards to Taught Masters courses?

Issue: The new mechanism will just perpetuate the concentration of awards in a small number of HEIs

Issue: How flexible will the BGPs be post award?

Issue: By fixing this model over 5 years you are fixing the 3+1+3 model for the arts and humanities. What flexibility will there be if the community wants to move to a 4+3 or 3+4 model?

Issue: What possibility is there for growth over the 5 years if it's based on historic data?

Issue: The timetable does not allow enough time for HEIs to run their own student recruitment, or for students to reapply for a place at an HEI entering the Studentship Competition if they are unsuccessful in gaining a place at an HEI holding a BGP.

Issue: The capping of the Studentship competition could mean that HEIs in that competition gain less awards than they currently do.

Issue: Will the cap in the Studentship Competition be applied by scheme?

Issue: How will interdisciplinarity be catered for, and specifically across the subject boundaries with other Councils?

Issue: How will the AHRC ensure that small / emergent / endangered areas will be protected?

Issue: Will it be possible for HEIs to combine their own money with AHRC money to increase capacity?

Issue: There is a perception that the BGP competition is of a higher quality than the Studentship competition

Appendix E
AHRC Event – London 30th July 2007
Issues Arising

Issue: Concern was raised the proposed 80/20 % funding split between the BGP and studentship competition, particularly as it was felt HEIs in the BGP scheme could be granted all of a subject area's annual award allocation, making it impossible for students in those subject areas to access funding through the studentship competition

Issue: Concern was raised over basing the threshold for accessing the BGP scheme purely on previous the averaged number of AHRC awards gained by an HEI

Issue: Concern was raised over the impact the new schemes will have on student behaviour, particularly in terms of the risk of students making multiple applications for BGP places at different HEIs

Issue: Concern was raised over how HEIs who are unsuccessful in or ineligible to apply to the first round of the BGP scheme could ensure that they effectively build capacity to access the second round within the parameters of a capped Studentship competition

Issue: Concern was raised over the potential loss of subject specialist knowledge during the assessment of BGP applications and the information that will be available to them at the point of assessment as there will be no project-specific data

Issue: Will the assessment of BGP applications take into account the new RAE scores?

Issue: Concern was raised that the implementation of the new schemes may lead HEIs to contravene current EU employment law in their recruitment for students for BGP places

Issue: What will the criteria be to access the second round of the BGP scheme?

Issue: Concern was raised that Art and Design subjects will be locked out of the BGP scheme as they are traditionally within HEIs that do not gain a high number of awards annually

Issue: Concern was raised that collaborative partnerships may be used by smaller HEIs solely to access the BGP scheme

Issue: Could a collaboration occur between an HEI that does meet the BGP threshold requirement and one that does not?

Issue: How will the new schemes work in terms of joint degrees, particularly if one partner institution does hold a BGP award and one does not?

Issue: Concern was raised over how the capping mechanism for the Studentship competition will allow second round access to the BGP scheme

Issue: How will the student nominations process work?

Issue: Concern was raised over the impact of internal politics on the allocation and administration of BGP awards

Issue: Concern was raised over subjects being left out of BGP bids and the potential impact on staff behaviours within an HEI