



Arts & Humanities  
Research Council

## **AHRC Review of Postgraduate Funding**

### **Report of the working group reviewing the AHRC's postgraduate funding mechanism**

**Issued for consultation, October 2006**

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**1. Executive summary**

1. The AHRC's Council recommended in December 2005 that a working group should be established to consider whether the annual open competition for AHRC postgraduate awards remains the most effective mechanism for allocating the Council's funding for postgraduate research and training, and for enabling the AHRC to fulfil its responsibilities as a research council. The working group, chaired by Professor Rachel Cooper, includes representatives from a cross-section of institutions and of arts and humanities disciplines.
2. The working group was asked to consider the extent to which the AHRC should seek to stimulate and support strategic planning and capacity building in arts and humanities postgraduate research and training within the UK's higher education institutions (HEIs), while continuing to maintain excellence and to support the highest quality postgraduate students.
3. The working group has consulted widely as they have addressed these questions, with staff at HEIs, with representatives of the key arts and humanities subject associations and learned societies, and with its own postgraduate panel and Committee members. This report constitutes the second, and final, stage in the consultative process: institutions and other interested organisations are invited to respond to the proposals set out below (see section 7 for details).
4. In developing a new model for postgraduate funding the working group has based its thinking closely on the AHRC's strategic aims, in order to ensure that the proposed new mechanism reflects and supports the AHRC's priorities and vision as a research council. The working group has agreed a number of key goals for the proposed new funding model, which build on the AHRC's strategic priorities. These include:
  - Ensuring the provision of world-class training in research methods and in the key skills that postgraduates in the arts and humanities will need for research or other professional careers
  - Maintaining and promoting the health and sustainability of arts and humanities disciplines, especially those that are emerging or endangered
  - Sustaining and developing the research base through responsive and, where appropriate, strategic academic research and postgraduate training
  - Supporting arts and humanities researchers in a wide variety of institutions, at all stages of their careers, to produce world-class research
  - Fostering interdisciplinary research.

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5. The AHRC's strategic aims can be found in full in section 2 of the report, along with the working group's terms of reference. Details of the working group's new funding proposal can be found in section 5 of the report.
6. Under the proposed model, institutions will apply to the AHRC for a portfolio of postgraduate awards for a period of up to five years. This will allow the institution to plan around a guaranteed investment in their arts and humanities postgraduate students, and to develop sustainable strategies for postgraduate research and teaching in the arts and humanities over the longer term. An institution's proposal will explain how its own plans over the term of funding meet the AHRC's goals for postgraduate funding, and set out its own strategic priorities for developing and sustaining postgraduate research and training in the arts and humanities.
7. The institution's proposal will explain what studentships it will offer with AHRC funding, setting out in which subject areas and departments and at what level (Master's or doctoral) these will be each year. The AHRC expects to see a mixed environment of large-scale proposals (e.g. for over 150 postgraduate awards) from single institutions and from groups of institutions in collaboration where appropriate, and of smaller-scale proposals from smaller institutions, specialist monotechnics and smaller collaborations where appropriate. The new model will better allow both large and small institutions to be assessed according to quality-based published criteria in an open and transparent system.
8. Institutions not holding one of the new blocks of AHRC postgraduate awards will still be able to submit Master's and doctoral applications to the open competition for individual postgraduate awards, albeit on a much more limited scale than is currently the case.
9. The key drivers in determining the allocation of funding in the new system will be the health of arts and humanities disciplines, the renewal and sustainability of the research base, capacity building in postgraduate research and training in the arts and humanities, and maintaining excellence by funding the highest-quality students. In making its funding decisions under the new system, the AHRC will be guided by the strategies set out in institutions' applications, and by the key goals of the new system and of the AHRC's strategic aims.

## **2. Context**

### **i) Introduction**

1. The AHRC's Council recommended in December 2005 that the AHRC's postgraduate funding mechanism should be reviewed. The Council recommended that a working group be established to consider whether the current system of allocating postgraduate awards through an annual, open competition remains the most appropriate and effective method of achieving the Council's aims.

### **ii) Extracts from the AHRC's revised Vision and Strategy (September 2006 draft)**

1. The working group has sought to ensure that its review of the current system takes full account of the AHRC's recently updated vision and strategy, and that its proposals for a new system of postgraduate funding are consistent with the AHRC's strategic aims, helping the AHRC to fulfil its mission as a research council. The recently revised strategic aims are set out below for reference:

#### **STRATEGIC AIM 1**

**To promote and support the production of world-class research in the arts and humanities.**

##### *Objectives*

- 1.1 To support arts and humanities researchers in a wide variety of institutions, working individually or in groups, and at all stages of their careers to produce world-class research.
- 1.2 To develop, renew and expand the research base through responsive and, where appropriate, strategic academic research and postgraduate training.
- 1.3 To foster interdisciplinary research within and beyond the arts and humanities.
- 1.4 To collaborate with academic communities and with other stakeholders in the public and private sectors to introduce strategic programmes that address emerging areas of research and pressing national and international concerns.
- 1.5 To create opportunities for UK-based researchers to collaborate with colleagues in other countries in administratively efficient ways.
- 1.6 In collaboration with libraries, archives and other bodies, to develop scholarly infrastructure, including digital resources and the use of information and communication technology.

## **STRATEGIC AIM 2**

**To promote and support world-class postgraduate training designed to equip graduates for research or other professional careers.**

### *Objectives*

- 2.1 To ensure the provision of world-class training in research methods and in the key skills (including intellectual rigour, languages, leadership, international engagement, knowledge transfer and teaching) that postgraduates in the arts and humanities will need for research or other professional careers.
- 2.2 To assist institutions to integrate their postgraduate programmes with their research and knowledge transfer strategies.
- 2.3 To maintain and promote the health and sustainability of arts and humanities disciplines, especially those that are emerging or endangered.
- 2.4 To work with external stakeholders in the public and private sectors to ensure that the training provided to postgraduate students is appropriate for future careers.

## **STRATEGIC AIM 3**

**To promote and enhance the impact of arts and humanities research by encouraging researchers to disseminate and transfer knowledge to other contexts where it can make a difference.**

### *Objectives*

- 3.1 To promote the dissemination of knowledge produced by researchers so as to enrich the quality of life and creativity of the United Kingdom and to make demonstrable impacts on culture, society, the economy, and government.
- 3.2 To support arts and humanities researchers who are exemplars of knowledge dissemination and transfer.
- 3.3 To develop stronger links between arts and humanities research and users such as the creative and cultural industries.
- 3.4 To support UK museums, galleries, libraries and archives to engage in world-class research and knowledge transfer.

## **STRATEGIC AIM 4**

**To sustain and raise the profile of arts and humanities research in the UK and abroad and to be an effective advocate for its significance in social, cultural and economic life.**

### *Objectives*

- 4.1 To maintain our excellent reputation and high quality of service to grant applicants and grant holders and to other stakeholders while delivering

activities that implement this Strategic Plan during a period of major organisational change.

- 4.2 To improve understanding by stakeholders (including the United Kingdom government and the media) of the value of research and training in the arts and humanities.
- 4.3 To play a leading role in the development of arts and humanities research worldwide.
- 4.4 To promote and support activities that foster engagement by the public with arts and humanities research, including the Research Councils' 'Science in Society' programme.
- 4.5 To maintain and enhance a communications programme that through listening and dialogue effectively explains and advocates our policies and activities.
- 4.6 To provide evidence-based assessments of the value and importance of arts and humanities research to the United Kingdom in order to provide a strong case for public funding.
- 4.7 To evaluate our own programmes and activities in order to increase their effectiveness.

**iii) Terms of Reference for the working group on the AHRC's review of postgraduate funding**

The working group was established following a recommendation of the AHRC's Council in December 2005, and met regularly between March and September 2006. The working group is made up of academics from across the AHRC subject domains, to ensure representation from the different disciplines and from a cross-section of institutions across the UK. The group's membership is set out in Annex C.

The group's terms of reference are to:

1. Consider the extent to which the AHRC's current open competition provides the most effective mechanism for the allocation of funding for postgraduate research
2. Consider the extent to which the AHRC should seek – through its allocation of funding – to stimulate and support strategic planning in arts and humanities research at postgraduate level within higher education institutions
3. Consider the extent to which the AHRC should seek to increase its strategic focus in its support of postgraduate research
4. Consider the extent to which the AHRC should seek to build postgraduate capacity in individual departments and institutions
5. Consider the extent to which the current ring-fenced doctoral awards scheme has been successful in its aims and should be retained in some form

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6. Consider whether different mechanisms should be operated in relation to funding at Master's and doctoral level
7. Take into account issues of equal opportunity, mobility and student choice.

### 3. The current annual open competition

#### i) Brief history

1. The AHRC inherited its postgraduate funding system and patterns from its predecessor body, the British Academy, when the Arts and Humanities Research Board was first established in 1998. The British Academy had been responsible for providing doctoral and Master's funding for students in the humanities. A number of professional and vocational Master's awards were also inherited from the Department for Education and Employment (as it then was) – these had been allocated by formula in areas such as Librarianship and Information Studies, Art and Design, and Interpreting and Translation Studies.
2. These two earlier competitions for Master's awards, Competition A (derived from the British Academy) and Competition P (derived from the DfEE quota awards) were replaced in 2004 by the new Research Preparation Master's (RPM) and Professional Preparation Master's (PPM) schemes.
3. Doctoral candidates applied through two separate schemes in 2001 and 2002, one for the humanities and one for the creative and performing arts; from 2003 a single doctoral competition has operated, covering the whole of the arts and humanities subject domain, including practice-based research.
4. In keeping with its responsibility to train researchers of the future, the AHRC is committed to making more awards available at doctoral level, and aims to ensure that 50% of new awards (i.e. approximately 750 awards) made by 2007 are at doctoral level. In order to achieve this within the funding available, this inevitably means a corresponding gradual reduction in the number of Master's awards available, since the historical inheritance was for roughly two-thirds of the total awards made to be at Master's level.
5. The AHRC's postgraduate programme now has a budget of nearly 38 million a year. This includes the costs of recent developments such as the Collaborative Doctoral Awards scheme and the Collaborative Research Training scheme, but the bulk of the budget represents the funds distributed to institutions and individual postgraduate students through the open competition.
6. Approximately 100 higher education institutions hold AHRC postgraduate awards in any one year. Award-holders are found at HEIs of a range of different types and sizes and in a variety of locations across the UK, from small-scale and specialist institutions holding just one or two awards, to large institutions holding over 100 awards.
7. Application numbers have grown steadily over the years, reaching 6,000 in 2006, with a particularly strong increase at doctoral level (to over 2,500 doctoral applications), as Table 1 below shows. Until the decision to shift the balance of awards away from favouring Master's applications began to take effect after 2004, success rates at doctoral level were declining steadily.

**Annex 1**

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<b>Year</b>	<b>Applications</b>	<b>Awards taken up</b>	<b>Success rate</b>
1990	1,270	520	41%
1998	1,785	556	31%
2000	1,716	582	37%
2001	1,704	619	36%
2002	2,091	590	28%
2003	2,886	576	24%
2004	2,417	612	25%
2005	2,588	632	24%
2006	2,549	675	26%

8. AHRC postgraduate awards are allocated through an annual open competition. Students submit their application for AHRC postgraduate funding via the institution at which they intend to study. The application consists of a 500-word proposal from the student, references from two referees who are able to comment on the student's track record and potential, and information from the institution about why that department is the most appropriate one for the student to pursue their particular interests, as well as information about the supervision, training, resources and support available.
9. The annual competition is announced formally each December, with the deadline for applications being around 1 May each year. The applications - 6,000 in 2006 - are checked and logged by AHRC staff in early May, and distributed to the peer reviewers. The peer reviewers are senior academics from the arts and humanities community, sitting in eight panels according to subject area. The peer review panels consider the applications during May and June, each assessor reading around 200 applications. The panels meet in early July to agree final grades, and final funding decisions are ratified by the AHRC's Postgraduate Committee in mid-July. AHRC staff then notify all candidates and their institutions of the outcome of their application in late July and August, with successful candidates taking up their award from October. Each year the AHRC has funding to offer 1,500 new postgraduate awards.

## **ii) Strengths and weaknesses of the current competition**

1. The following list is drawn from the panel members' comments gathered at their meetings to prepare for the 2006 competition; from information provided by panel conveners in their reports on the 2006 competition; from the consultation events on the review held with HEI staff in mid-June, and with subject association representatives; and from the working group's own discussions.

### **Perceived weaknesses**

- i) Outcomes are published late in the summer, and institutions risk losing good candidates to other opportunities.
- ii) The application form and procedure is geared around traditional academic subjects, professional subjects can suffer, and applicants

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with professional experience rather than traditional academic backgrounds may feel disadvantaged.

- iii) It allows neither the AHRC nor institutions to act strategically; it does not allow AHRC to address issues such as the health of disciplines, the renewal of the research base, and capacity building, and it does not allow institutions to plan long-term as studentships are not guaranteed year on year.
- iv) It is overly bureaucratic, with a high administrative burden involved for applicants and both academic and administrative staff in HEIs, for largely unsuccessful applications. It involves a lengthy, repetitive process for AHRC staff, reducing the time available to participate with more productive projects and to engage fully with institutions.
- v) It is not perceived as the best mechanism to support part-time students.
- vi) Master's applications are hard to assess because submitting applications by early May means that insufficient information is available on the student's track record and potential for postgraduate study. Similarly, doctoral applications are hard to assess as information on an applicant's progress at Master's level must be submitted so early on in the year.
- vii) There is strong reliance on the class of undergraduate degree: this can lead to concerns about grade inflation on the DR form.
- viii) The decision-making process is not guaranteed to follow the ranking provided by the department, although departmental staff feel better placed than external peer reviewers to judge the relative quality of applicants.
- ix) There are not enough studentships to fund all the high-quality students who apply, leading to decreasing success rates. Peer review panels are under strain to discriminate between the many well-qualified, well-supported and articulate candidates, on the basis of limited information, and it is difficult to provide adequate feedback on this basis.

**Perceived strengths**

- i) A crucial driver in the arts and humanities is the student and their individual project; the responsive mode, student-led competition caters for this effectively.
- ii) Students who gain funding feel they have gained a prestigious award in a national competition.
- iii) It seeks to identify the best students doing the best projects, in the most appropriate environment for their course of study: quality is a key driver.
- iv) Funding decisions are based on peer review – a trusted assessment mechanism, involving impartial judgment of applications.
- v) It is open to all institutions throughout the UK.

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2. The aim of the working group in proposing a new postgraduate funding mechanism for the AHRC was to ensure that the weaknesses of the current system were addressed, and that the strengths were retained and reinforced as far as possible in any new funding system.

#### 4. Consultation Process

##### i) Who and how has the working group consulted?

1. The working group held its main consultation event on 15 June 2006. The aim of this event was to consult with the AHRC's key stakeholders on the review; to gather feedback on the AHRC's current postgraduate competition, and to discuss the suitability of alternative postgraduate funding mechanisms. An e-mail invitation was sent to all the AHRC's contacts at HEIs across the UK, to arts and humanities subject associations, and to some key employer groups. Attendance at the event was limited to one participant from each institution/organisation in order to ensure that all stakeholders were given the opportunity to participate in the consultation.
2. The event began with introductions to the activities of the working group and the background to the AHRC's Postgraduate Review by Professor Rachel Cooper, Chair of the working group, and Professor Tony McEnery, Director of Research at the AHRC. There was opportunity for a general discussion at the end of the morning session. In the afternoon participants split into four breakout groups, discussing the Block Grant Partnership proposal, postgraduate funding mechanisms of other Research Councils, and whether a completely new system should be proposed for the operation of AHRC postgraduate funding. In the final plenary session a spokesperson from each group fed back their group's conclusions, and the event ended with a final general discussion. Members of AHRC staff were present in all breakout groups to record discussions, and a detailed report of the day was considered by the working group at a subsequent meeting. A summary report of the event is available on the University Staff pages of the AHRC's website: [www.ahrc.ac.uk](http://www.ahrc.ac.uk).
3. The AHRC held its annual Learned Societies and Subject Associations Meeting on 14 June 2006. In the afternoon of this event there was an opportunity for participants to attend a workshop on the AHRC's Postgraduate Review. Participants split into small groups discussing the topics detailed in paragraph 2 above. At the end of this session the groups fed back their conclusions and engaged in a general discussion on the main issues of the review. Members of AHRC staff were present in all breakout groups and a detailed report of the workshop session was submitted for the working group's consideration. A list of participants attending the events on 14 and 15 June 2006 is included at Annex D.
4. The Postgraduate Peer Review Panel Members were also consulted by the working group. Panel Members were informed of the review at their annual information days in March 2006, and their comments reported back to the working group. The Conveners of each panel were also asked to include their panel's thoughts on the review in their Convener Report (a report compiled by each panel at the end of each competition). Any comments from these reports were again submitted to the working group. Some institutions and Subject Associations have chosen to submit e-mailed comments on the review to the AHRC; any such correspondence from stakeholders has also been brought to the group's attention.

**ii) What evidence and data has been considered?**

1. The working group considered a variety of evidence and data in the process of reviewing the AHRC's postgraduate funding mechanisms to ensure it met all elements of its terms of reference as detailed in section 2(iii) above.
2. The working group also commissioned a study from DTZ Consulting and Research, on the time cost of the current competition to institutions. This report confirmed the high demands of time input the annual competition places on the academic and administrative staff at all institutions submitting postgraduate applications to the AHRC, as well as the demands placed on the AHRC's academic peer review panels.
3. The main evidence considered by the working group is listed in Annex A.

**iii) HEIs' views of the current and proposed system**

1. The views expressed by institutions in the consultation events, and in any submitted correspondence, in reference to the current system, have been summarised in section 3(ii). Many perceive value in the open, student-led approach of the current competition – any good student with a viable project has the opportunity to apply for AHRC funding through the institution at which he/she wishes to study. Participants were also in favour of the peer review element of the open competition. Participants were generally in agreement that the current competition was very bureaucratic, entailing a high administrative burden for academic and registry staff, and for students. Many participants were also agreed that a solution to the issue of the high volume of unsuccessful applications should be a limit set on the numbers of applications a department or institution can submit to the AHRC.
2. Many participants expressed an interest in the proposed new system of blocks of postgraduate awards made to institutions, being attracted by the flexibility and the opportunities for long-term investment this system offers, though remaining suspicious of internal institutional allocation of awards.

**iv) HEIs' views of other Research Councils' postgraduate funding systems**

1. In both the Learned Societies and Subject Associations event on 14 June and the consultation event on 15 June 2006, one breakout group was asked to discuss the quota system operated by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), and another the Doctoral Training Account (DTA) system operated by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) and the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC). Though these breakout groups directed discussions to consider these particular mechanisms, participants at both events did also refer to the postgraduate funding mechanisms of other Research Councils in their general discussions.

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2. In discussion of the **ESRC's** mechanisms for postgraduate funding, most participants were agreed that this model of quota allocation and recognition exercises would be problematic for the AHRC. Participants noted that the ESRC's systems seem to focus on methodology of study and collective working (a social science model), rather than individuals working on their research project (a common model in the arts and humanities). The ESRC's 1+3 model was also seen as too restrictive for the arts and humanities, requiring students to formulate their doctoral thesis at the start of their Master's level study.
3. In discussion of the **EPSRC's** and **BBSRC's** model of DTAs, participants noted that this kind of block funding may be more workable in science-based subjects where team-based research is more common. It was agreed that the flexibility the DTA system offers to institutions is likely to be beneficial, though a potential problem was highlighted of institutions favouring their own students in any applications for studentships. A further negative aspect of DTAs may be that the responsibility for the allocation of funding and its strategic use is devolved to the institution, reducing the AHRC's responsibility as a national body with an overall view and strategy for postgraduate funding in the arts and humanities.
4. The potential benefits of DTAs for institutions were identified as increased stability and opportunity for planning (an institution will know well in advance how many studentships it can offer), and flexibility to reallocate studentships if a student declines an award or leaves an institution. This system may also be beneficial for part-time students, as institutions will be able to offer more flexible part-time studentships.
5. Participants in both breakout groups discussed the issue of how DTAs or quotas, if introduced, could effectively be allocated to institutions. The use of any form of metrics was seen as problematic; these can become 'self-fulfilling prophecies' with past performance affecting future performance. Though long-term allocations of funding such as DTAs can offer institutions long-term stability, they can also lead to stagnation, and can 'lock-out' institutions for long periods of time. It was agreed by most participants that with either form of funding system, an open competition would need to be retained to prevent this 'lock-out' of certain students. The ESRC recognition exercise was discussed, and participants were in agreement that this was overly burdensome for institutions.
6. Participants also commented that the other Research Councils often have different agendas in their funding as compared to the AHRC. Many of the subject disciplines covered by these Councils are facing recruitment difficulties, and studentships are often used as a recruiting tool in these subjects. Arts and humanities subject disciplines do not generally suffer from this problem, and the AHRC certainly does not have enough studentships available to meet the demand of high-quality students that currently exists. The AHRC should therefore not seek to align its priorities or its funding systems with that of the other Research Councils.

## 5. Proposal for a new system of PG funding for the AHRC

### i) Outline of proposal

1. The AHRC's working group reviewing its postgraduate funding system has developed a new model for postgraduate funding, which is intended to maintain the current commitment to quality – funding excellent postgraduate students to undertake Master's study and doctoral research in an appropriate and high-quality research environment for their subject area – while creating more flexibility for institutions, allowing them and the AHRC to develop longer-term plans for sustaining and developing postgraduate research and training in the arts and humanities. The proposed model is the Block Grant Partnership Scheme.
2. The working group has agreed a number of goals for this new funding model to ensure that it enables the AHRC to fulfil its responsibilities as a Research Council and that it is compatible with the AHRC's vision and strategic aims for the future. The goals are that any new funding system must:
  - Promote and support a strategy for producing world-class postgraduates in the arts and humanities who are equipped for careers in research and other professions
  - Sustain and promote high-quality research and training across the full range of arts and humanities disciplines, maintaining the health of these disciplines
  - Develop and sustain capacity in the arts and humanities within departments and institutions large and small, embracing both those that have already achieved excellent standards and those that are just beginning to build capacity
  - Extend and enhance opportunities for interdisciplinary research and training, where appropriate
  - Enhance interaction across the arts and humanities research community with the cultural, heritage and creative sectors
  - Ensure that AHRC funds are supporting excellent postgraduate students, taking account of the need for balance and diversity in the spread of disciplines and for balance between Master's and doctoral awards, and ensuring equal opportunities for all candidates
  - Ensure the distribution of funding is resource effective for institutions and for the AHRC.
3. Under the new funding model proposed, institutions will apply to the AHRC for a portfolio of postgraduate awards for a period of up to five years. This will allow the institution to plan around a guaranteed investment in their arts and humanities postgraduate students, and to develop sustainable strategies for postgraduate research and teaching in the arts and humanities over the longer term.

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4. In applying to the AHRC, an institution will have to explain how its own plans over the term of funding (up to five years) meet the AHRC's goals for postgraduate funding (see paragraph 2 above), and what its own strategic priorities are for developing and sustaining postgraduate research and training in the arts and humanities.
5. The institution's proposal will set out what studentships it will offer with AHRC funding, detailing in which subject areas and departments and at what level (Master's or doctoral) these will be, and for Master's awards whether these will be for research preparation or professional preparation courses. The level of detail about subject areas is expected to be very broad – at the level of Archaeology or Music, for example, or of recognised fields within disciplines (e.g. medieval history or 20th-century colonial history), rather than specifying the project titles of individual doctoral theses. In other words, the intention is for institutions to make available awards in certain subject areas, to which they will match strong students with an excellent proposal, rather than the system being driven by pre-determined research projects to which students are recruited.
6. While there will be some limited scope for amending the proposed distribution after a block of awards has been granted to the institution, in order to deal with exceptional circumstances such as a student not taking up their place, the intention is for the institution to distribute funding to departments and subject areas according to the plan approved by the AHRC.
7. Institutions will be required to justify, with appropriate evidence, why they are a good place for postgraduates to study in the relevant subject areas, for example by describing the recognised expertise of researchers and supervisors in the relevant departments, and the existence of a good research environment and postgraduate community.
8. The new model will better allow both large and small institutions to be assessed according to quality-based published criteria in an open and transparent system. Many smaller and specialist institutions should be well placed to submit persuasive and coherent proposals under the new system, perhaps based on plans to sustain excellence already achieved in postgraduate training, or to develop capacity in newly emerging departments and fields of research. The new model will allow AHRC funding both to maintain and develop areas of existing excellence, and to build capacity in other areas, while still doing so through the support of the highest-quality individual students.
9. For funding offered through the Block Grant Partnership scheme, there will be a two-stage assessment process, in which all proposals are first assessed against the published criteria and allocated a grade, and a second stage where all fundable proposals are then reviewed to ensure that the final range of proposals offered funding achieves the strategic aims of the AHRC and of the new system. This will include seeking an appropriate coverage of the arts and humanities disciplines, and an appropriate balance of Master's and doctoral awards (bearing in mind the AHRC's commitment to make at least 50 per cent of its new awards at doctoral level each year). There will be a right-to-reply process after the

first assessment stage to allow applicants to correct any factual errors or misinterpretations in the initial assessment.

10. If appropriate, a group of institutions may apply in collaboration for funding. One institution would lead the bid and be the recipient of the AHRC block of funding. The AHRC would need reassurance that measures were in place to distribute and monitor funding and responsibilities among the collaborating partners appropriately. This could allow some small institutions, for example, to pool resources and research training provision to create a better research environment for arts and humanities postgraduate students than they could provide individually. Collaboration with a partner organisation outside higher education may also be possible, where appropriate, for students wishing to carry out doctoral research in partnership with a relevant organisation (as is the case with the AHRC's Collaborative Doctoral Awards scheme, which will continue to run as a separate scheme).
11. Institutions not holding one of the new blocks of AHRC postgraduate awards will still be able to submit Master's and doctoral applications to the open competition for individual postgraduate awards, albeit on a much more limited scale than is currently the case.
12. The open competition will not be identical to its current format. Institutions will be required to co-ordinate the applications they submit to the AHRC and to manage demand to ensure that only those applications that meet a high-quality threshold are put forward, with the aim of decreasing the number of unsuccessful applications submitted, and increasing success rates. The AHRC is currently developing a mechanism for determining a fair and transparent cap or limit to the number of applications institutions may submit in the open competition under this new system.
13. The AHRC expects to see a mixed environment of large-scale proposals (e.g. for over 150 postgraduate awards) from some single institutions and some collaborating institutions where appropriate, of medium-scale bids, and of smaller-scale proposals from smaller institutions, specialist monotechnics and smaller collaborations where appropriate. Without wishing to introduce unnecessary volatility into the system, there is an expectation that the new funding landscape will not necessarily replicate the current status quo.
14. In summary, the key drivers in determining the allocation of funding in the new system will be the health of arts and humanities disciplines, the renewal and sustainability of the research base, capacity building in postgraduate research and training in the arts and humanities, and maintaining excellence. In making its funding decisions under the new system, the AHRC will be guided by the strategies set out in institutions' applications, and by the key goals of the new system and of the AHRC's strategic aims.

**ii) How does it take account of and address key concerns raised during first stage of consultation?**

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1. The AHRC is committed to funding excellent students in the most appropriate and most supportive research environment for their particular field of study. The new postgraduate funding system will not change that commitment, and the AHRC will scrutinise institutional bids for evidence that institutions and departments will allocate AHRC awards to individual students by a fair, open and transparent process that seeks to ensure that AHRC awards are allocated by the institutions to the best students in the relevant fields.
2. It will still be possible for institutions to respond to students who approach them with a promising PhD proposal and to offer them an award. With the outcomes of institutions' bids to the AHRC announced in the early spring under the new system, this will eliminate the current uncertainty of students and departments not knowing the outcome of their individual application for funding until late summer.
3. The proposed new system will require the relevant departments and units to agree in advance what balance of subject areas will make up their institution's bid to the AHRC. If a bid is successful, the institution will be required to allocate AHRC awards in accordance with its proposed plan. The AHRC will not be concerned with specifying individual research projects, but will respond to the institution's strategy as set out in its proposal. The intention is that there will be no scope for an institution to allocate awards in any way other than according to the pattern agreed by the AHRC. Limited scope to reallocate will be possible in exceptional cases, and only with the AHRC's prior approval, for example if a student fails to take up their place, or if a significant new area of expertise or opportunity arises during the period of funding. This will be an opportunity for departments to collaborate in putting together their institution's bid in the first instance, and the intention is that the eventual allocation of AHRC awards to individual students will be in accordance with the departments' plans and priorities.

**iii) How does it build on the strengths of the current system?**

1. The new system will still allow departments to respond positively to excellent students who approach them with an attractive PhD proposal in whatever field of research is covered by the institution's block grant award. In this way the student and their individual project can still remain a crucial driver, and the importance of the individual research project in the arts and humanities not be lost.
2. The new system will be transparent in its processes and in the criteria upon which applications for funding will be judged. The draft assessment criteria for the scheme are included at Annex B. Studentships offered by institutions through the new system should be labelled as AHRC studentships, and as institutions should seek to appoint the highest-quality students to these awards, the funding should still be seen as an indicator of merit and prestige.
3. The new model will better allow both large and small institutions to be assessed according to quality-based published criteria in an open and transparent system. Many smaller and specialist institutions should be

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well placed to submit persuasive proposals under the new system. The new model will allow AHRC funding both to maintain and develop areas of existing excellence, and to build capacity in other areas, while still doing so through the support of the highest-quality individual students.

4. The new system will retain the current emphasis of funding on three key areas of postgraduate study in the arts and humanities: doctoral research, Master's level preparation for doctoral research, and Master's level preparation for a professional career in key areas of the arts and humanities infrastructure (including in librarianship, museums and galleries, archives, conservation, and practising in the creative and performing arts and design). In bidding to the AHRC for a block of postgraduate awards, institutions may propose any appropriate combination of Master's and doctoral awards, or only Master's or only doctoral awards, as long as they can demonstrate that this is compatible with their own and the AHRC's strategic goals.

**iv) How does it address the weaknesses of the current system?**

1. Institutions will gain increased stability of funding, and the opportunity for long-term planning for their postgraduate research and training in the arts and humanities. The timing of the new scheme will ensure institutions can offer high-quality candidates funding at a much earlier stage than the current system, reducing the risk of losing such candidates to other institutions.
2. Institutions will be responsible for selecting the students that will benefit from the BGP funding. While all students allocated an AHRC award by an institution will have to be approved by the AHRC, institutions will be able to select students on the basis of a more detailed knowledge of that student's capability, interests and experience (whether based on interview or any other selection procedure). This will address one frequent criticism of the current open competition, which is that because AHRC peer reviewers are obliged to rely solely on the information provided in the application form to make their decisions, institutions sometimes feel the wrong candidates are successful. Institutions selecting students to study on arts-based and practice-led courses may also wish to use selection procedures appropriate to these subject disciplines, (for example, auditions, submission of portfolio). This will ensure that students of all academic backgrounds are not disadvantaged in applying for funding and are assessed appropriately.
3. The current system does not allow the AHRC to fulfil its responsibility as a research council in maintaining and promoting the health and sustainability of arts and humanities disciplines (see section 2(ii), the AHRC's revised Vision and Strategy). The new system will continue the open competition's aim of seeking to ensure that funding goes to excellent students who are studying in a department and institution that is the most appropriate for their chosen research topic, and which is able to provide high-quality support, supervision, resources and training in that field. The new system will develop this still further, with the aim of helping to build and sustain excellent research environments to support talented

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postgraduate students across the full range of the arts and humanities subject domain.

4. The overall administrative burden will be reduced under the new system. It should represent a decrease in wasted administration and in uncertainty for an institution since work can be focussed, once a proposal has been successful, on selecting the best students to take up a known number of awards. With the introduction of some form of demand management in the remaining open competition element of the new system, a smaller-scale open competition should also be a less bureaucratic operation for institutions. The burden of external peer review in the new system thus lies not at the level of approving individual students, but rather at the level of approving an institution to allocate awards on the AHRC's behalf, on the evidence that it has mechanisms to do so robustly and fairly.
5. The new system will give institutions the flexibility to award full-time and part-time awards as appropriate, and at comparable levels of support.
6. While the AHRC's funding is limited, and the new scheme does not represent any substantial increase in the funding available, the AHRC must attempt to use its funding in the most effective manner possible. It is envisaged that offering guaranteed funding to institutions over a number of years will encourage institutions to invest in and support their arts and humanities departments in a way that is not possible under the uncertainty of the current annual system. In this manner AHRC funding will work to maintain the health and sustainability of arts and humanities disciplines, as detailed in the AHRC's Vision and Strategy (see 2(ii)).

## 6. Recommendations to the AHRC's Postgraduate Committee and Council

The Working Group makes the following recommendations to the AHRC's Postgraduate Committee and Council:

- i) A system of Block Grant Partnerships (BGPs) should be implemented as a mechanism to award AHRC postgraduate funding.
- ii) The BGPs should be awarded for a substantial period of time, up to five years. Institutions that gain BGPs will be able to submit a fresh proposal for a subsequent period of funding towards the end of the first period of funding (e.g. in the fourth year of a five-year grant).
- iii) In applying for a BGP institutions will have to demonstrate what their own strategy is for developing and investing in postgraduate research and training in the arts and humanities over the term of the BGP, and to demonstrate how this strategy engages with the AHRC's goals for postgraduate funding (see section 5(i) above).
- iv) In applying for a BGP institutions will have to determine and specify their intended spread of studentships across subject, across Master's and doctoral study, and across research-based and professional Master's courses. They will not be required to include all arts and humanities subject areas or both Master's and doctoral awards, but they will be required to demonstrate that their proposed allocation is robust, coherent, sustainable and meets the AHRC's key goals for postgraduate funding. They should also demonstrate how the proposal is compatible with both the institution's and the AHRC's strategic aims for postgraduate research and training in the arts and humanities.
- v) In awarding postgraduate funding, the AHRC should not necessarily seek to replicate the current distribution of funding. Rather, in responding to institutional proposals, it should seek to maintain excellence, to build capacity, and to sustain the health of arts and humanities disciplines across the UK, ensuring the new funding mechanism supports the AHRC's strategic aims and responsibilities as a research council (see 2(ii) above).
- vi) Collaborative bids between institutions will be eligible and encouraged where appropriate. Collaborative bids will have to demonstrate that mechanisms are in place to support the collaboration, and that the proposed collaboration is viable and sustainable.
- vii) A form of open competition should be retained, though on a greatly reduced scale. This will require some form of demand management, and a mechanism to limit application numbers (such as capping an institution's application numbers) should be considered.
- viii) The new scheme for offering postgraduate funding should be implemented on a large scale from its outset. The working group recommends a 75/25 split in the first year of implementation, with at least 75% of the AHRC's available postgraduate awards invested in the

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BGP scheme and the remainder supporting the open competition. This ratio may be reviewed in the future, but it is likely that some element of open competition will need to be retained indefinitely.

- ix) To ensure that all institutions have sufficient time to formulate their proposals under the new system, and to ensure that the AHRC has an appropriate timescale to implement all the changes needed to its internal systems, it is recommended that the first BGP competition should run in **autumn 2008**, with outcomes published early in 2009, in order that students can be selected for BGP funding and be ready to begin their AHRC-funded postgraduate study in October 2009. The deadline for the open competition should remain in early May.
- x) The Collaborative Doctoral Awards scheme, the Collaborative Research Training scheme, the Library of Congress scholarships, the Language-based Area Studies scheme, and project studentships attached to AHRC large research grants should continue to operate as they do currently, and should remain separate from the new system.

## **7. Consultation**

### **i) Questions for consideration by those responding to consultation**

The working group welcomes comments from institutions, subject associations and learned societies, and from relevant non-academic stakeholders, and will consider all responses made before formulating its final report and recommendations to the AHRC.

**We would be grateful if responses to this report could address the following questions:**

1. How would a BGP bid be formulated in your institution?
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?
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?
4. What would be the advantages for your institution of applying for up to 5 years' funding (as compared to the current annual competition system)?
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?
6. Do you foresee any issues with the implementation of BGP funding in your institution and/or the sector?
7. Do you have any suggestions for improvement to the model that would be beneficial for your institution and/or the health of the sector?
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?

### **ii) How to respond to consultation, and deadline**

Responses to the consultation should be made on the pro-forma which will be sent by e-mail to Vice-Chancellors and Heads of relevant organisations across the UK. We would ask that the comments of relevant colleagues are co-ordinated by the Vice-Chancellors of institutions, Heads of organisations, or Chairs of subject associations, so that one response is submitted on behalf of each institution or organisation.

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The deadline for all responses is **3 November 2006**. Please e-mail the completed pro-forma to Jessica Bacon at [j.bacon@ahrc.ac.uk](mailto:j.bacon@ahrc.ac.uk) by this date. If the Vice-Chancellor or Head of your organisation has not been sent a pro-forma for responses then please e-mail Jessica Bacon.

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**AHRC/C/07/7****iii) Timetable for current and next stages of review**

The table below provides a general indication of the next steps in the review of the AHRC's postgraduate funding mechanism. In order to present a complete picture, it assumes that the working group's proposed new system will be accepted by the community following this consultation and by the AHRC's Postgraduate Committee and Council – but this outcome is in no way taken for granted at this stage. The timetable may be subject to change, for example if the responses to the consultation, or the AHRC's Postgraduate Committee or Council require further development of the model. We will keep the sector informed should any changes arise. Please consult our website for up-to-date information.

Early October to 3 November 2006	Working group's final report published for consultation
Early to mid November 2006	AHRC and working group consider responses from community
22 November 2006	AHRC's Postgraduate Committee considers final report and recommendations
14 December 2006	AHRC's Council considers final report and recommendations
Throughout 2007:	AHRC develops internal systems and processes
	AHRC communicates new system to sector through information days, workshops and institutional visits
	AHRC publishes guidance on new system for AHRC institutional staff and peer review assessors, providing training sessions where appropriate
May 2007	Deadline for 2007 open competition
By the end of 2007:	Final guidance on new scheme published for community. First call announced for bids to the BGP scheme (deadline autumn 2008, for Oct 2009 start)
Throughout 2008:	Continuing communication and guidance for sector
May 2008	Deadline for 2008 open competition
Autumn 2008	AHRC deadline for BGP* bids
Early 2009	Outcomes of BGP bids announced
Early 2009	Guidance for 2009 open competition published, including list of institutions who can access open competition
May 2009	Deadline for 2009 open competition (reduced scale)
October 2009	Students funded through BGPs and open competition commence their studies

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\* *BGP = Block grant partnership, the proposed new funding arrangement for AHRC awards.*

## **Annex A**

### **Evidence and data considered by the working group**

AHRC Statistics on Doctoral awards made by department, 2002-2004

AHRC Statistics on the level of part-time applicants to its open competition

Analysis of AHRC ring-fenced doctoral awards

Comparison of HEI performance in the AHRC Postgraduate and Research Competitions

Consultation events

Consultation with panel members

Final report of the AHRC's working group on the UK doctorate in the arts and humanities (2005) (available on the AHRC's website)

HESA Statistics detailing the arts and humanities postgraduate populations at institutions receiving AHRC awards

HESA Statistics on the spread of postgraduate students in the arts and humanities by part-time and full-time study, and by ethnicity

Options for new funding mechanisms presented by members of AHRC staff

Presentations on employer and training related issues from English Heritage, the Higher Education Academy, and the Technology Development Group

Report on the current banding of AHRC postgraduate awards

Report on options for allocating funding between proposed new system and open competition

Report on options for demand management of the open competition

Report on options for assessment process of proposed new system

Report on the assessment processes of AHRC Research Centres

Report on the time and cost of current competition to AHRC

Report commissioned from DTZ Consulting and Research on the time cost of the current open competition to the staff of Higher Education Institutions and to student applicants

Submitted comments from stakeholders

Survey of the postgraduate funding mechanisms of the other Research Councils and other funding bodies

Views of completed Doctoral Award Holders on the AHRC's Standards of Service

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Views of 2005 Finishers in the Doctoral Programme on the training, supervision and support received from their institution.

## Annex B

### Draft Assessment Criteria

In assessing institutions' bids for a block of AHRC postgraduate awards under the proposed new system, it is envisaged the AHRC will be looking for the following evidence:

- That the institution has engaged with the AHRC's goals and strategy for postgraduate funding.
- That the institution has a coherent strategy for promoting and developing postgraduate research and training in the arts and humanities disciplines, and that the AHRC funding it requests will clearly support and build on its own strategy.
- That there is a convincing rationale for the proposed spread and amount of studentships (in terms of spread across subject disciplines, Master's and Doctoral level courses, research-based and professional courses), reflecting the institution's own plans for sustaining and developing excellence in certain areas and/or building capacity in certain areas.
- That there is appropriate training provision in place in terms of transferable and subject-specific skills, both for research-based and professional courses at Master's and doctoral level.
- That effective supervisory arrangements are in place for research-based courses.
- That an appropriate research environment is in place for all students supported through AHRC funding.
- That effective processes are in place to monitor students' progress and to support students whose circumstances may change.
- If the bid is from a collaboration, that the collaboration is robust and viable, with mechanisms already agreed for responsibilities including financial arrangements, student monitoring and training, pooling of research and training resources.
- That appropriate mechanisms are in place to ensure transparent and effective use of the AHRC's block of funding over the period of the award, and to monitor expenditure of the funding.
- That the institution has proposed a fair, open, and transparent selection process to allocate AHRC funding to individual students; that this process will seek to appoint the highest-quality students, considering equal opportunities and student mobility issues.
- That the institution's strategy is sustainable beyond the term of the AHRC funding.

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Fuller details of the assessment process and criteria will be published in 2007.

**Annex C**

**Membership of the AHRC's Working Group reviewing its postgraduate funding mechanism, 2006**

Professor Rachel Cooper, Lancaster University (Chair) (Design)

Professor Graeme Barker, University of Cambridge (Archaeology)

Professor Robert Harris, University of Dundee (History)

Professor Tony McEnery, Director of Research, AHRC

Professor Lyn Pykett, University of Wales, Aberystwyth (English)

Professor Carole-Anne Upton, University of Ulster (Drama)

Dr Emma Wakelin, Association Director of Programmes, AHRC

Mr Keith White, King's College London (School of Humanities Administrative Officer)

Mrs Jessica Bacon, Senior Awards Officer, AHRC (secretary)

**Annex D****Institutions & organisations attending consultation event (15 June 2006)**

Anglia Ruskin University	University of Abertay, Dundee
University of Birmingham	University of Bath
Aston University	University of Cambridge
Bath Spa University	University of Chester
Bristol Old Vic Theatre School	University of Derby
British Philosophical Association	University of Dundee
British Society for the History of Science	University of East Anglia
Cardiff University	University of Essex
Council for College and University English	University of Glasgow
Durham University	University of Gloucestershire
English Heritage	University of Hertfordshire
Goldsmiths College	University of Hull
Guildhall School of Music and Drama	University of Kent
Imperial College	University of Leeds
Institute of Education	University of Leicester
Institute of Historical Research	University of Manchester
King's College London	University of Newcastle
Keele University	University of Northampton
Kingston University	University of Nottingham
Lancaster University	University of Oxford
Leeds Metropolitan University	University of Plymouth
Liverpool John Moores University	University of Reading
London Metropolitan University	University of Salford
London School of Economics	University of Sheffield
London South Bank University	University of Southampton
Loughborough University	University of St Andrews
Manchester Metropolitan University	University of Stirling
Middlesex University	University of Strathclyde
Museums Association	University of Surrey
National Association for Music in Higher Education	University of Sussex
National Film and Television School	University of Ulster
Northumbria University	University of Wales, Aberystwyth
Nottingham Trent University	University of Wales, Bangor
Oxford Brookes University	University of Wales, Newport
Queen Mary, University of London	University of Warwick
Queen's University Belfast	University of Worcester
Roehampton University	University of York
Royal College of Art	UWE
School of Advanced Study	Victoria and Albert Museum
Sheffield Hallam University	Wimbledon School of Art
SOAS	
Society for French Studies	
Subject Committee for Archaeology	
Trinity College of Music/Laban	

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University College London  
University of Aberdeen

**Annex D (continued)**

**Learned Societies and Subject Associations attending consultation event  
(14 June 2006)**

Archaeology Subject Association  
Association of Art Historians  
British Association for American Studies  
British Association of Slavonic and East European Studies  
British Philosophical Association  
British Society for the History of Science  
Council for British Archaeology  
Council for College and University English  
Council of University Classical Departments  
Council of University Deans of Arts, Social Sciences, and Humanities  
Economic History Society  
Media, Communications and Cultural Studies Association  
National Association of Music in Higher Education  
National Association of Writers in Education  
Royal Music Association  
Social History Society  
Society for the Promotion of Byzantine Studies  
Society of Legal Scholars  
Standing Committee of University Departments of Drama  
The English Association  
The Linguistics Association of Great Britain  
The Museums Association  
University Council of Modern Languages