



## Submission of Evidence to the Nurse Review of Research Councils

### Introduction and summary

1. The British Academy – the UK’s national academy for the humanities and social sciences – welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to the Nurse Review of the Research Councils.
2. This submission highlights the following points:
  - a. We strongly support the current structure of dual support for UK research funding. Together they allow for a common funding ‘ladder’ of grants, of which all parts are an essential component, each enabling and complementing the other.
  - b. Capacity should be maintained for both investigator-led and strategically-led research.
  - c. As per our submission to the triennial review of the research councils, we do not see any benefit in merging the ESRC and the AHRC.
  - d. Indeed, based on the size of the research community in the humanities and social sciences, the quality of the output, and the significance of the challenges we face as a society, there is a strong case for re-examining the low proportion of research council funding currently allocated to the AHRC and the ESRC.
  - e. Enhanced collaboration between the research councils could be achieved through a more prominent role for RCUK.

### Strategic Decision Making

3. The British Academy strongly supports the current structure of dual support for UK research funding. The complementarity of both legs of the dual support system – block grants from HEFCE, HEFCW, SFC and DELNI in the form of QR funding (or equivalent), and project funding via the research councils – is a real strength of the UK system. The system offers an excellent model to other countries around the world, which is evidenced by the high productivity and excellence of the UK research base across the full range of disciplines. The UK continually punches above its weight – a country with 0.9% of the global population, 11.6% of global citations and 15.9% of the world’s most highly cited articles.<sup>1</sup> The UK also ranks second in the

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<sup>1</sup> Elsevier 2013 *International comparative performance of the UK research base – 2013*. (See [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/263729/bis-13-1297-international-comparative-performance-of-the-UK-research-base-2013.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/263729/bis-13-1297-international-comparative-performance-of-the-UK-research-base-2013.pdf), accessed 27 November 2014)

world for the quality of its scientific research institutions<sup>2</sup>, second in the Global Innovation Index<sup>3</sup>, and fourth for its university-industry collaboration in R&D.<sup>4</sup> The research councils should be praised for their central role in maintaining this position as the second leg of dual support. Alongside QR funding, and additional streams provided by charities, the private sector, and the national academies, the mixed model of research funding in the UK, within which the research councils sit, is both effective and demonstrably good value for money.

4. The British Academy believes that direct public investment provides a much higher return on investment than other policy instruments to catalyse innovation, such as tax credits. In the Academy's submission to the most recent Triennial Review of Research Councils<sup>5</sup>, we pointed to a 2010 report that provided "strong evidence of market sector productivity benefits from public spending on research councils with a very high, but diminishing, estimated rate of return. We find no evidence of market sector spillovers from public spending on civil or defence R&D. Taken together these findings tentatively suggest that in a world of constrained fiscal spending Government innovation policy should focus on direct spending on innovation, specifically research councils, rather than through tax incentives, such as the R&D tax credit, to firms."<sup>6</sup>
5. The mixed economy model also supports the fundamental process of developing a research project. For a humanities or social sciences discipline, public QR funding provides absolutely essential infrastructural support, and space for researchers to undertake 'blue sky', curiosity-driven research. This may be followed by a British Academy Small Grant to commission a pilot project, analyse the findings of a small survey, or hold a workshop. The results of a workshop will then be fed into a larger Research Council grant application, leveraging further funds from the cultural or commercial sector. This is a very common funding 'ladder', of which all parts are an essential component, each enabling and complementing the other.
6. The two main research councils for the British Academy's disciplines – the humanities and social sciences – are the AHRC and ESRC. However, HSS academics and teams are involved in projects funded by a whole range of research council projects. The research councils must balance funding calls that are shaped by

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<sup>2</sup> World Economic Forum 2014 *Global Competitiveness report 2014-15*. (See [http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GlobalCompetitivenessReport\\_2014-15.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GlobalCompetitivenessReport_2014-15.pdf), accessed 27 November 2014)

<sup>3</sup> Cornell University, INSEAD, WIPO 2014 *The Global Innovation Index 2014: The Human Factor in Innovation*. (See [http://www.wipo.int/pressroom/en/articles/2014/article\\_0010.html](http://www.wipo.int/pressroom/en/articles/2014/article_0010.html), accessed 27 November 2014). The Global Innovation Index compares 143 economies on 81 indicators.

<sup>4</sup> *Op. cit.*, note 2.

<sup>5</sup> The British Academy 2013, *Submission to the Triennial Review of the Research Councils*, see: <http://www.britac.ac.uk/news/news.cfm/newsid/895>, accessed April 2015

<sup>6</sup> Imperial College Business School March 2010, *Public Support for Innovation, Intangible Investment and Productivity Growth in the UK Market Sector*

nationally-recognised priorities and challenges, and more flexible support mechanisms for curiosity-driven research: strategic large grants versus ‘responsive mode’. The Academy believes that the right balance between the two has been maintained in recent years, but would warn against increased emphasis on the former as society’s challenges become more severe. These challenges will be best tackled through a healthy balance between directed grants and blue skies research, and the research councils must maintain a focus on both.

7. There are many connections and complementarities between the social sciences and the humanities at the level of the subject area. However, we do not see any benefit in creating a single council for the two broad sets of disciplines. The Academy would be concerned about the structural impact that this might have on such a wide-ranging subject community. Such a body would be unwieldy and would doubtless struggle to provide the strategic need of such a varied and diverse research community, which risks undermining the UK’s highly successful track record of research in these disciplines. The AHRC and ESRC serve some very specific subject needs, such as the promotion of quantitative skills methodologies and languages in social sciences, which may differ in the arts and humanities. The skills needed at PhD-level are also tremendously varied across the subject areas covered by the two councils, and a merged body may impact negatively on the quality and specificity of doctoral training. The British Academy already works effectively with both councils to bring the two communities together where necessary, providing a location and capacity for additional interplay between the humanities and social sciences, and speaking with one voice to Government where appropriate. At the level of research council, however, two distinct bodies with separate agendas are essential.
8. Going forward, it will be important for all research councils to strengthen their activity where they add most value as part of the mixed economy of research funding in the UK. This should also reflect the needs of specific disciplinary areas. As larger and longer grants become increasingly common, the ESRC and AHRC should work with the British Academy and other funders to ensure grants and calls are complementary, and that any gaps in the research funding ‘ladder’ are filled. Similarly, researchers in the humanities and social sciences are undertaking more research in large teams, or as part of multi-disciplinary or inter-disciplinary teams. The ESRC and AHRC should maintain flexibility in their programmes to ensure that these large team projects are complemented by opportunities for the support of individual researchers.
9. The distinctive needs of the social sciences and humanities communities should also be reflected within the European funding context. At present, there is a move in the Horizon 2020 programme for humanities and social sciences to be ‘embedded’ in other calls, which risks their being subordinated to other disciplines. The AHRC and ESRC are important actors in helping to ensure that the arts, humanities and social sciences dimensions are recognised in their own right.

## **Collaborations and Partnerships**

10. The research councils have increased their collaborative activity, both in terms of funding research initiatives and in minimising waste and driving efficiency. New shared services to support the delivery of their collective objectives (such as grant administration, IT, HR, finance and procurement) have been well implemented, without damaging the core activity. While there should be as much commonality and as many shared services as possible in back office functions, the services face different research communities and are more likely to do an effective job if their front-facing elements are specialised to their individual stakeholder communities, including relevant businesses and industry.
11. Interdisciplinary research is generally well supported, and the research councils and RCUK have made significant efforts to drive collaboration across disciplinary boundaries. In many cases, the AHRC and ESRC have leveraged additional funds from public and non-governmental sources. The What Works Centre for Wellbeing represents a significant development in the provision of different forms of evidence and expertise for policymaking, and the ESRC has leveraged additional funds from the AHRC, but also Public Health England, DCMS, Arts Council England, Heritage Lottery Fund and English Heritage. The Academy is particularly supportive of cross-council programmes where problems and challenges are framed within a social sciences or humanities context, drawing upon other disciplines to find solutions. A strong example of this is the 'Global Uncertainties' programme, led by the ESRC, with EPSRC and AHRC as core members, and BBSRC, MRC and STFC as affiliated members.
12. However, there are perceived barriers that should be addressed (some of which sit with the universities themselves, or the way in which research is assessed). The British Academy is currently looking in depth at the issue of interdisciplinary research, and will report in early 2016. This project will not simply focus on the funding of research, but also on how funding interacts with university structures, publishing, and research assessment.
13. In response to the specific question of the funding of the universities sector versus organisations such as the Met Office, the Academy does not agree with restricting access to research council funding further, particularly around doctoral training. While our world-beating universities sector should continue to be the primary recipient of research council funding, there are particularly valuable Collaborative Doctoral Awards offered alongside research institutes, and removing these could diminish the progress made around connecting the best academic research to wider society. Additional funds for research institutes where there is strategic need would be welcome, but it is important that the funds available to UK universities to bid for are not restricted, particularly for the humanities and social sciences where the funding pots are already squeezed.

## **Balance of Funding Portfolio**

14. On the basis of data from the 2014 REF, the percentage of all active UK research staff submitted to REF 2014 working in disciplines that would primarily be applying to the AHRC and the ESRC, stands at around 48%. This does not take into account psychologists (across the full range of that discipline including social science orientation) who are submitted to Main Panel A. The Academy estimates that the true figure is 50% or higher. However, the funding allocated in 2015-16 to these two research councils combined was only 9% of the total research council allocation (£251.5 million out of a total of £2.67 billion).<sup>7</sup> In this context, the success of the social sciences and humanities in REF is even more impressive - 95 % (580 out of 612) of individual submissions to the 11 sub-panels in Main Panel C were awarded some 4\* in their overall profiles, and over 71% of all research submitted to Main Panel D was judged either world-leading or internationally excellent.
15. In the context of today's global challenges – climate change, an ageing population, tackling infectious disease, economic growth, wellbeing – adequate funding of societal and humanistic analysis is crucial. These challenges cannot be tackled effectively by a technical, scientific, or medical solution alone; we must properly resource the research that uncovers why individuals, communities, societies, and populations behave and interact as they do. This is where the humanities and social sciences must take centre stage. We recognise that the costs of undertaking research in the natural, medical, and physical sciences, and in engineering, are often higher than those in the humanities and social sciences. However, it is our belief that, based on the size of the research community in the humanities and social sciences, the quality of the output, and the significance of the challenges we face as a society, there is a strong case for re-examining the low proportion of research council funding currently allocated to the AHRC and ESRC. Indeed, many technological developments in social sciences and humanities – for example, brain imaging in psychology, radio carbon dating in archaeology, and the digital humanities – now require these disciplines to receive a comparable level of investment to the natural and physical sciences in order to remain internationally competitive.
16. The funding provided by the research councils in the form of postgraduate studentships is vital in attracting, nurturing and training the UK's best students. The Doctoral Training Centre (DTC) approach to postgraduate funding as adopted by ESRC for some years, and more recently by the AHRC, is working well. Funding through DTCs has meant that postgraduates train as part of a cohort. This allows for sufficient critical mass for students to share their experiences and support one another, as well as access shared training opportunities. We also welcome ESRC's decision to be flexible in its approach, and use specific Centres for Doctoral Training (CDTs) to work collaboratively with other research councils and partners to provide

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<sup>7</sup> See: [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/332767/bis-14-750-science-research-funding-allocations-2015-2016-corrected.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/332767/bis-14-750-science-research-funding-allocations-2015-2016-corrected.pdf), accessed April 2015

complementary postgraduate funding that is more responsive to new or emerging research issues or urgent skills gaps. The AHRC have been particularly successful in using the CDT/DTC model in the targeted areas of Design, Modern Languages, and Heritage.

17. As mentioned in response to theme 1, we believe that there should be capacity for both investigator-led and strategically-led research. The research councils should maintain flexibility to ensure that there is space for investigator-led research across disciplines.

### **Effective Ways of Working**

18. As mentioned earlier in response to theme 2, there is much evidence that the AHRC and ESRC are increasing their partnerships with each other, and with the other research councils. However, this is not always how the research councils are perceived within the academic community, and more could be done to examine how the research councils might better promote cross-council initiatives and interdisciplinary projects in the UK. RCUK international offices have a track record of success in facilitating collaborative activity across all research councils; consideration could be given to boosting the role of RCUK in coordinating this in the UK.
19. Additionally, we believe there is scope to consider the role of RCUK in relation to the research councils as a whole, with a particular focus on enhancing collaboration. For its part, the British Academy enjoys productive relationships with the research councils, particularly with the AHRC and ESRC. Alongside the councils, the Academy is a signatory to the UK Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers, an agreement between funders and employers of research staff to improve the employment and support for researchers and research careers in UK higher education. Furthermore, the three funders work closely to ensure that they avoid duplication in the funding that they provide, that there is a clear focus for their respective schemes, and that there is a robust process of delineation of which subjects/fields come under which research councils. As part of these efforts, for example, the British Academy, the AHRC and the ESRC drew up in January 2011 a joint statement setting out how the three bodies “work together in planning and delivering their various programs with the specific aim of ensuring each is clearly distinctive and, overall, addresses strategic and developmental needs including the provision of sufficient new capacity”.<sup>8</sup>
20. The research councils and the Academy also work together on specific projects relating to issues of strategic importance. For example, the ESRC is a key partner in the Academy’s High Level Strategic Group for Quantitative Skills. Moreover, the ESRC and the British Academy, alongside HEFCE, supported the Researcher

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<sup>8</sup> See: [http://www.britac.ac.uk/funding/support\\_for\\_research.cfm](http://www.britac.ac.uk/funding/support_for_research.cfm), accessed April 2015

Development Initiative (RDI) aimed at training undergraduate teachers of quantitative methods. This initiative was part of a £1.7m joint project aimed at enhancing undergraduate teaching in quantitative methods by encouraging curriculum change and student development, and enhancing quantitative methods skills of university teachers.

21. Similarly, the British Academy and AHRC together support the UK's 5 LBAS (language based area studies) centres. This funding is used to offer development through three main pathways: business internships and placements; policy internships and placements; and research exchange programmes. Also, in 2015, the Academy and the AHRC have partnered with the Wellcome Trust and the School of Advanced Study to organise the Being Human Festival of the Humanities.
22. Alongside these longstanding initiatives, the Academy collaborates regularly with the ESRC and the AHRC on events, policy reports, forums and conferences. These cover a wide range of issues including housing, support for early career researchers, and population studies.

#### **Any other comments**

#### **Strategic resources in the humanities and social sciences**

23. The Academy would like to draw attention to an anomaly in the wider research funding ecosystem that merits further consideration. This anomaly concerns the funding of national strategic resources in the humanities and social sciences. For example, the School of Advanced Study, University of London (SAS) consists of 9 institutes and associated library collections, with a national role in facilitating research in humanities (broadly defined, i.e. including related social sciences, like Law, Politics, some Area Studies). It has an annual grant from HEFCE of some £8.7m p.a., delivered through the University of London. It is, however, an official national strategic resource, underpinning excellence in research - analogous say to the Synchrotron at Hartwell in supporting scientific research excellence. But the latter is funded and overseen by a research council, whereas SAS is funded by HEFCE. This is anomalous - SAS funding is drawn from HEFCE's T grant, which means that it is not within the research funding ring fence, and so is subject to annual turbulence in T funding (it suffered cuts in 2014). This means that resource for national research facilitation in humanities and related social sciences suffers a disadvantage compared with the sciences. There is a strong case for this funding to be brought within the ring fence, i.e. treated on a par with resources in other disciplines, and the Nurse review is urged to give it attention. This is not a plea about funding for the University of London – it is about the status and location of the funding stream to support national research infrastructure. We would also welcome consideration of additional strategic national needs in our disciplines, for example, sustained national capability in the languages, societies and cultures of (some) other countries, and other strategically important and vulnerable subjects (SIVS).

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