



# Executive Summary

## Evaluation of the Mid-Career Fellowship Scheme



Research & Evaluation Services



## Introduction

The British Academy Mid-Career Fellowship (MCF) both supports outstanding individual researchers with excellent research proposals, and promotes public understanding and engagement with humanities and social sciences. The fellowship offers six to twelve months of funding for mid-career researchers (who are normally within fifteen years of their doctoral award at the time of application).

Cloud Chamber were commissioned to evaluate the scheme in 2018, alongside the British Academy's Postdoctoral Fellowship scheme. This executive summary presents the findings of our MCF evaluation. Further detail can be found in our full evaluation report.

The aims of the evaluation were to:

- Assess the effectiveness of the scheme in meeting its stated objectives
- Make a summative judgement of the impact and significance of the scheme
- Compare the scheme against other funding schemes available to mid-career researchers, and assess whether the scheme fills a distinctive and valued niche in the funding landscape

- Assess demand for the scheme, in light of changes to the research funding landscape
- Assess the added value of the British Academy in delivering the scheme, and help to make the case to government to retain block funding within the Academy as part of the comprehensive spending review due to take place in 2019

Using a mixed methods research design, we undertook the following activities as part of the evaluation:

- A Theory of Change workshop with Fellows of the British Academy, Academy staff and award holders
- An online survey of MCF award holders who received an award between 2012 and 2017. 109 fellows completed the survey
- A desk-review of the wider research funding landscape
- Semi-structured telephone interviews with 17 senior academics in higher education institutions
- Semi-structured telephone follow-up interviews with 17 fellows
- Semi-structured telephone interviews with six unsuccessful applicants to the scheme

- A desk review of diversity monitoring data related to the scheme

Our fieldwork took place between September 2018 and January 2019, with an interim report submitted to the Academy in November 2018.

This report summarises the impact on the scheme on fellows, the impact of the scheme on the higher education sector, and considers the evidence on diversity of the scheme. We present conclusions and key recommendations to the British Academy.

## Impact on Fellows

This section summarises the main impacts on fellows evidenced by the evaluation. We cover research, career, and further funding impacts.

### Research

#### Research skills

There was a positive impact of the fellowship on research skills according to survey respondents. Particularly, their confidence in being able to secure research funding and their ability to develop deeper expertise in a particular area.

The ‘buy-out’ nature of the funding allowed fellows more time to engage with their research and in some cases was enhanced by increased networking with other researchers. The ability to deepen existing skill sets was particularly valued by interviewees.

#### Research impact

84% of respondents published an output as a direct result of their fellowship. A journal article was the most common output: 197 journal articles were generated by 81 respondents. Journal articles represented

nearly half (47%) of the 416 research outputs reported.

Over three quarters of respondents (76%, n=94) felt their public engagement skills had increased as a result of the fellowship. Around three quarters of fellows were involved in public lectures or seminars. Numerous benefits were associated with public engagement including:

- Greater focus or clarity of research
- Greater reach and significance of the research generated through external or new perspectives
- New or more relevant research questions
- More accessible, relevant and original research
- Improved skills at communicating with non-specialist audiences
- Thinking from an audience perspective, and considering issues from different viewpoints
- Better networking skills
- Career development benefits (as public engagement is valued within Universities)

The majority of respondents (86%, n=78) planned to maintain some form of public engagement into the future (n=78).

### Career Progression

All our evidence collection confirms there is a career progression benefit associated with the MCF scheme:

- Over half of respondents (60%, n=109) secured promotion since undertaking the fellowship
- Of those 65 respondents, 94% felt the fellowship was either very important (69%) or important (25%) in securing the promotion
- Fellows reported high levels of confidence and ability to secure career development, and recognition by peers in a discipline or department as a result of the fellowship

Interviewees were extremely positive about the impact of the MCF upon their career progression. A number of factors were given for this, including:

- The fellowship provided evidence of attracting research funding
- Research undertaken during the fellowship had enhanced reputation

- Profile within the university and wider academic community had increased as a result of public engagement work
- The completion of publications resulting from the period of the fellowship
- Broader skillsets demonstrated as part of the fellowships such as organising seminars and conferences

A number of interviewees further commented that the fellowship had provided a means of re-establishing enthusiasm and momentum in their careers at a time when teaching commitments and administrative duties had started to dominate.

Survey respondents considered the fellowship to be more effective at building links within a discipline compared to other disciplines, or non-academic networks.

Factors that were cited as being helpful in building both academic and non-academic networks included:

- The opportunity to travel
- The time to develop networks
- Networking opportunities with non-academic audiences

- Public engagement to generate non-academic contacts
- Organising conferences and workshops
- The prestige of the British Academy

A key benefit of the fellowship identified by interviewees was the time it gave them to invest in their personal contribution or to take the initiative and bring together a network of experts specific to them.

### **The counterfactual**

We explored what might have happened in fellows' careers if they were not awarded the fellowship. Overall, respondents were of the opinion that their career would have been in a worse position. Major themes emerging from the responses included:

- Detrimental impact on promotions
- Slower pace of career progression
- Less likely to have research grant success
- Lessened ability to focus on research
- Weaker commitment to public engagement

### **Research Funding**

The majority of fellows who participated in this evaluation said that receiving their MCF

had improved their ability to secure further research funding in the years following the fellowship, as a function of both the confidence gained from securing the fellowship and the skills/experience developed.

This viewpoint is supported by quantitative estimates from our survey of MCF fellows:

- £41.7m of research grants were reported by 58 mid-career fellows, obtained following completion
- The average value per respondent was £719,000 with each holding almost two grants each following the fellowship (1.7)
- Two thirds were named as principal investigators
- Extrapolating this result for our sample (n=109) to the population (n=254), suggests that the scheme might be associated with £97.2m of research grant funding

Interviewees told us the fellowship helped grant capture as it helped to establish a focus, a track record, improved application drafting skills and increased self-confidence.

## University Perspectives

### Individual impact

The MCF award can help to revitalise an academic career. Like many MCF award holders the universities also recognise that an MCF can give time and space to an individual to undertake significant research and give their research and profile a boost. There is an expectation that a fellowship will lead to additional funding for the academic.

Universities generally felt that the approach to research impact or public engagement was a positive. This was also well received by award holders even if it was not their key motivator for applying for the fellowship. MCF awards are seen as excellent springboards to develop both future research grants but also for the development and nurturing of REF impact case studies. Nurturing impact culture is very important for universities.

### Institutional impact

The impact of MCF awards on research culture can be significant. Due to the nature of the scheme they are held by more established researchers who may already be leaders in their department, thus they are able to amplify

their impact through the MCF award. These grant holders are often in a better position to influence wider colleagues and culture.

### Sectoral impact and positioning

The value of BA schemes is seen as prestigious for institutions, but they are not necessarily ranked any higher than other schemes or funders although this often varies by discipline. The AHRC and Leverhulme Trust are well regarded in the Humanities in particular while the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and European Research Council (ERC) are well regarded in the Social Sciences. Universities have an interest in maximising funding so if relevant they will often promote other, more valuable, funding schemes over British Academy schemes if the proposed research project and academic profile fits.

Universities value the role that fellowships play in their departments, faculties and research centres. Although British Academy fellowships are not necessarily seen as more prestigious or important than other fellowships, they play an important role in both research income generation within institutions and can contribute to research culture and environment more broadly, especially within a REF context.

The Humanities and Social Sciences are facing particular funding pressures in the current climate as the focus of government and other research investments has been on STEM disciplines. Universities were clear that the British Academy plays a critical role in supporting research in these areas and this must be retained.

### Suggestions for improvement

- Increasing the clarity of guidance, particularly success criteria and the application process
- Feedback on unsuccessful applications would be very helpful, especially for early career researchers for whom the PDF might be their first grant application
- The scheme is not as well-known as other British Academy schemes; further promotion of the MCF would be welcome
- The MCF scheme should be retained although there were mixed views regarding the public engagement element
- Universities would welcome fellowships to be held on an 80% FTE basis to enable academics to retain a closer level of integration with their department

## Key Recommendations

The following recommendations take into account all the evidence drawn from the evaluation including the suggestions put forward by fellows and universities. We have grouped the recommendations as follows:

- Process management
- Scheme promotion
- Public engagement
- Scheme enhancements

### Process management

Universities and fellows broadly support the existing process of applying for an MCF. Improvements could be made in two areas:

- The Academy should make the differences between stage one and stage two applications better known. An example of a scheme that makes this distinction clear is the ERC. Both academics and university support staff are not clear on the differences between the two stages and therefore the requirements of them
- Transparency and feedback regarding applications would be very helpful for universities and academics. A clearer explanation of the assessment process and

criteria alongside feedback to unsuccessful applications (even if only at stage two) would increase the quality and relevance of applications

### Scheme Promotion

The MCF scheme is fairly well known although some universities and fellows felt that the scheme is less well known and understood when compared to other comparable schemes. To enhance promotion and the range of applications the BA could consider:

- Consider promoting the MCF scheme as one which can reinvigorate careers, especially for those who have had maternity, caring or other breaks in their career.
- Given the above, a key factor for the Academy to consider is how it incentivises and screens for those applicants who have the wherewithal to use the fellowship as a catalyst for innovative research and contributing to the research networks and the culture of their institution, rather than those who might see it as an opportunity to tick-off some things on the to-do list (like books)
- Undertaking more promotional activity around the MCF scheme either through funding roadshows at institutions or

inviting potential applicants to the British Academy to hear more about opportunities. These could be modelled on UKRI open days

- Highlighting key success stories, particularly those from minority groups or institutions less well represented among award holders, would help raise the profile and understanding of the scheme across the wider academy

### Public engagement

Universities and fellows had very different perceptions of the public engagement element of the fellowship. The majority of fellows did not apply for an MCF to do public engagement, but it was the key motivator. Ultimately however, the fellows did find the public engagement work to be rewarding. We recommend that:

- The British Academy retains the public engagement element of the mid-career fellowship. The evidence suggests that this is both positively received by both academics and universities
- The British Academy provides additional guidance to applicants to help fellows move from dissemination to public engagement. Good practice examples would support stronger engagement with

the public and increase public understanding and engagement with humanities and social sciences

### **Scheme Enhancements**

Universities broadly supported the funding model for the MCF although the practicalities of supporting a fellow and their department through backfilling posts can be challenging. The Academy may wish to consider:

- Creating variable buy-out of between 80-100% FTE. This may enable fellows to remain more ‘connected’ to their department or university during the fellowship. This would allow easier integration back into the department post-fellowship and may support an enhanced research culture. To compensate for this, the fellowship could be extended up to 18 months
- Tightening contract conditions to encourage universities to backfill fellow positions appropriately so that workload pressures are not unevenly distributed within departments. This would help departmental cohesion and culture in the hosting university.

## Conclusions

In this section we summarise our main conclusions from the evaluation's evidence and analysis. We use the evaluation's objectives, re-phrased here as questions, as the framework for our response.

### Does the scheme meet its stated objectives?

We have broken this section down into the elements of the MCF's stated aims:

- There is considerable evidence from both fellows and universities that the mid-career fellowship meets its primary aims and enables researchers to **complete major research and undertake public engagement** and communication of findings. Moreover, the dual nature of these goals are reinforcing insofar as fellows typically use the opportunity to disseminate their findings to further develop their networks and gain fresh perspective from this, which in turn can improve the research
- The fellowship provides significant **time freed from normal teaching and administrative commitments** which enables significant research to be undertaken. Evidence suggests that the 'buying out' of time is the key motivator for academics applying for an MCF
- Fellows consider that the fellowship has made a **significant and positive difference to their careers**. The difference is felt to be a fast-tracking of their careers by allowing them to publish findings, build their networks and both broaden and deepen their research skills. Wider skills such as project management and attracting funding are also critical factors in this development and fellows typically see the MCF as a key part of this. The comments from universities also reflected this and suggested that the MCF can help to revitalise an academic's career
- Fellows recognised that a key part of the award is to **undertake engagement and communication of their research findings with wider audiences**. The manner in which research findings are communicated to wider audiences differed significantly between fellows. For some, the communication of findings related to other academic or specialist audiences for whom the research would be considered to be innovative or 'cutting edge', while others had actively sought to engage more broadly with non-specialist audiences and the wider public to share findings. Exhibitions and conferences were often cited as the key methods of engaging with wider audience. We also identified some fellows who had leveraged newer approaches such as blogs, podcasts and YouTube videos
- A majority of fellows consider that **the scheme supports excellent innovative research** and that this is achieved by allowing researchers the time and space to develop their work and their networks in ways which would otherwise not be possible. A number of our interviewees highlighted the importance of the buy-out in this regard, stating that the time meant that they were able to fully prepare for conferences and meetings with other experts so that they could fully contribute and generate interest in their work
- Interviewees also commented that it was difficult to **evidence cultural, social and economic benefits** but that the lack of emphasis on impact by the British Academy was a good thing as it enabled greater freedom to develop the work organically. It is, however, worth noting that universities highlighted that a mid-career fellow can have a significant positive impact on the research culture within an institution and also that they did support the development of REF impact



case studies even though this is not an objective for the British Academy itself

- The majority of fellows felt that they would have **stayed in academia** irrespective of the fellowship award although their career trajectory would have differed. While we identified some cases where the fellowship award had led to researchers staying in the UK and turning down offers from overseas institutions as a result, others had subsequently taken up positions at foreign universities as their careers had developed
- **None of the unsuccessful applicants that we spoke to had left the UK** to continue their research and it is also noteworthy that neither successful and unsuccessful applicants were aware of similar, alternative funding sources from other countries which might have led them to consider overseas posts as a means to further their research
- The nature of the fellowship and the support from the academy makes it extremely challenging to **isolate its impact** as opposed to the support or inputs of other stakeholders. This reflects the fact that the MCF appears to act as a catalyst for the researcher to develop their work in a way that it is appropriate

for that subject matter and what they need to do to complete the work. For example, this may require the development of new skills, a focus on delivering quality outputs, investing in profile or building and leveraging a network. In many instances however, it requires a combination of these factors which can be mutually reinforcing and it is this flexibility that is valued by fellows and universities. Some universities also highlighted that funding pressures in the humanities and social sciences mean that opportunities to draw on other agencies' support is more limited and so the British Academy's role is of critical importance

### How does the scheme compare with other similar funding schemes?

Institutional stakeholders thought that the scheme compared with similar schemes from the perspective of its prestige and reputation, and was unique in terms of its ability to provide support to mid-career academics to pursue a dedicated piece of research. This often had the impact of revitalising research careers when they are at risk of stagnating due to teaching and administrative pressures.

### What is the likely future demand for the scheme?

Institutional stakeholders thought that demand for the scheme would remain high, in part driven by the prestige of the fellowship and the opportunity for time to be freed for mid-career researchers. Demand might increase with any post-Brexit limitation on European research funds, and in the absence of any new alternatives. Higher education enrolment data does not suggest that demand will change significantly in the near future.

### What added value does the British Academy deliver to the scheme?

There is a strong sense from the evidence that the role of the British Academy is pivotal to the success and reputation of the MCF scheme:

- The scheme, while highly regarded in its own right, benefits from the broader prestige associated with the British Academy
- Fellows appreciate the additional learning and networking opportunities provided by, or through the Academy

- Administrating the scheme from the fellow/institution perspective appears straightforward, although this was not a major focus of investigation in our fieldwork

The only common area for future improvement raised by both researchers and institutions was around the transparency of the application process.

### **Scheme Enhancements**

The Academy may wish to consider a number of potential changes to the scheme. These changes relate primarily to operational issues.

- Enabling Fellows to undertake their MCF on a part time basis (perhaps 80% FTE) would enable greater engagement with their department and potentially increase their impact on the research culture.
- Extending the length of time the MCF can be held for, up to 18 months, would help increase effectiveness of the public engagement element of the scheme by allowing more time for the research to be completed and engagement relationships to come to fruition.