



Executive Summary

Evaluation of the Postdoctoral Fellowship Scheme



Research & Evaluation Services

Introduction

The British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship (PDF) is a three-year award made to an annual cohort of outstanding early career researchers in the humanities or social sciences. The fellowship is principally a research award, with fellows expected to complete a significant piece of publishable research, which will be assisted by full membership of an academic community of established scholars working in similar fields.

Cloud Chamber were commissioned to evaluate the scheme in 2018, alongside the British Academy's Mid-Career Fellowship Scheme. This executive summary presents the findings of our PDF 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 early-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 PDF award holders who received an award between 2010 and 2015. 112 fellows completed the survey, representing a response rate of 40%
- 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 15 fellows
- Semi-structured telephone interviews with three 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

Over half of fellows responding to the survey (54%) ‘completely’ agreed that the fellowship helped them to increase their research skills.

Our interviews revealed a wide-range of subject specific and technical skills fellows had developed or refined as a result of the fellowship. Fellowships also encouraged more generic skills such as project management, presentation, and event management.

Fellowships provided the time to explore and develop their research agenda. Having dedicated space away from other roles and responsibilities allowed them to invest in their own skills development.

Collaboration with other researchers – sometimes across disciplines – had been a major factor in the skills development process. Writing skills in particular were seen to benefit significantly from collaboration,

particularly with more experienced researchers.

Teaching

The scheme expects that fellows will teach no more than 5 hours per week during award. While survey respondents typically reported that they delivered fewer than 5 hours of teaching per week (and this was corroborated in our interviews), there were benefits accruing to fellows through teaching via the fellowship:

- Two thirds of fellows said that their teaching skills had improved as a result of the fellowship (n=103)
- Opportunities were provided to design and deliver teaching that increased self-confidence and teaching experience
- Teaching to new audiences, including in other disciplines
- Feeling more integrated with departments and university life
- The space and time the fellowship offered helped to improve teaching. There were very few instances of teaching negatively impacting on fellows’ research.

For many, teaching had a positive influence on their research including communication skills,

clarifying ideas and challenging assumptions, and broadening subject knowledge beyond the confines of the fellowship topic.

Teaching experience also had career development benefits, helping fellows to become ‘more rounded’ academics, successfully integrating them into departments, and contributing to their academic CVs.

Research impact

Overall, 90% of survey respondents published an output as a result of their fellowship. A journal article was the most common output: 408 journal articles were generated by 97 respondents, or around 4 per respondent on average. Journal articles represented 53% of the 776 research outputs reported by respondents. Other outputs included book chapters, monographs, and films.

More than one third of survey respondents (36%) completely agreed with the statement ‘my research has a bigger impact as a result of the fellowship’. Ways the fellowship helped to generate impact included:

- Enabling wider research dissemination through travel, conferences, and the association with the British Academy

- Enhancing fellows' ability to engage with the public, policymakers and other non-academic audiences
- Second order reputational benefits associated with the prestige and reputation of the British Academy
- Finally, and importantly, the *time and space* provided by the fellowship enabled a greater focus on impact, such as dissemination and public engagement

Career

Career progression

Fellows commonly described the difficulties of securing a permanent, or at least more stable, academic position following the completion of a PhD. Career progression was cited as an important reason for a PDF application, and evidence suggests that a high proportion of fellows went on to secure career progression:

- 74% of respondents said that they had secured a promotion and/or a permanent academic position since completing the fellowship
- Of these, 81% stated that the fellowship was very important to securing that outcome and 16% said it was important

- The prestige of the fellowship and the focus on research excellence were the two most important factors in the fellowship contributing to career development

Qualitative survey evidence (n=35) and fellow interviews highlighted three main types of career progression:

- Role progression; most commonly, fellows were able to describe how they had changed roles following completion of their PDF
- Improved contractual terms; such as moving from fixed term to permanent or zero-hours to fixed term contracts
- Change of institution; often linked to securing a new role

More than half (59%) regarded the fellowship as being essential to accessing wider career development opportunities such as peer-reviewing research grant applications for major funders, or serving on an editorial board.

In the survey, over half (51%) of respondents completely agreed that the fellowship had helped them to broaden their academic network. Respondents noted the most important factors were the opportunity to

travel, organise conference and participating in British Academy events.

Leadership

Over a third (36%) of survey respondents completely agreed with the statement 'the fellowship has equipped me to be a future leader within my discipline' and 40% of respondents completely agreed that the fellowship had improved their research management skills. However, our qualitative research provided limited evidence of leadership development – with many saying it was too early to understand the impact of the PDF on their leadership capacity and potential.

Mentoring

In the survey of fellows, 83% reported that they had maintained a relationship with their mentor beyond the timescale of the PDF and the 'required' mentoring activity (n=112). Of the 17% who reported that the mentoring relationship had ended with the grant, only one made a negative remark about the experience.

We assess that the continuing relationship between so many fellows and their mentors is a strong indication that the PDF mentoring

process was positive for the vast majority of fellows.

The counterfactual

We explored what might have happened in fellow's 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:

- The risk of having to leave academia entirely
- Having a less stable employment situation
- Career development would have taken longer
- Foreign national fellows noted that, without the scheme, they might have struggled to stay on in the UK to pursue their academic career

We also spoke to three unsuccessful applicants to the scheme (all of whom were still in academia), While many found it difficult to have judge what might have been if they had been successful with the BA, their responses reinforced the major themes described previously.

Further Funding

Many of the fellows who participated in this evaluation said that receiving their PDF had definitely helped them to improve their ability to secure further research funding in the years following the fellowship. Our survey of previous fellows demonstrated:

- On average, respondents had secured **over two research grants (2.7)** following the completion of their fellowship
- Each individual grant on average had a value of almost **£250,000**. This average value increased with time elapsed since the fellowship started
- Extrapolating our sample (n=112) to the population (n=277), suggests that the scheme over the six years might be associated with **£73.2m of research grant funding**

Our interviews with fellows revealed a wide range of benefits of the fellowship in terms of securing further funding including:

- Establishing a track record;
- Improving application skills;
- Increasing self-confidence; and

- Gaining access to more opportunities

University Perspectives

Individual impact

All universities interviewed for this evaluation agreed that the PDF provides a strong platform for academic careers. The ability to do independent and high quality research is very important and is valued by academics and universities. Universities recognise that a PDF award holder is seen as being serious about their research and is recognised as a potential research leader by their peers.

They also recognised the importance of the British Academy as a funder. The award signals that the grant holder is serious about research and that they are building a platform for future research funding applications and success. This is increasingly important in the current climate where research income generation is crucial to success.

Institutional impact

Wider research culture impacts arising from PDFs within universities are harder to measure. The nature of the scheme encourages fellows to work in isolation so the

potential for wider cultural impact may be limited.

Sectoral impact and positioning

The Academy's schemes are seen as prestigious by institutions, but they are not necessarily ranked any higher than other schemes or funders (although this often varies by discipline).

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 given a focus 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 the scheme

Universities offered some suggestions to improve the scheme, these included:

- Increasing the clarity of guidance, particularly success criteria and the application process
- Removing the requirement for applicants not to have secured a permanent academic post would increase the pool of potential applicants
- The research expenses for the PDF scheme (£6,000) were considered too low by some institutions
- Feedback on unsuccessful applications would be very helpful, especially for early career researchers for whom the PDF might be their first grant application

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
- Diversity
- Funding Model

Process management

Universities and fellows are broadly supportive of the PDF application process, but both groups had common views on where improvements could be made:

- 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 both.
- Transparency and feedback regarding applications would be very helpful for universities and academics. A clearer

explanation of the assessment process and criteria alongside feedback on unsuccessful applications (even if only at stage two) is likely to increase the quality and relevance of applications.

Scheme Promotion

The PDF scheme is well known and promoted widely by universities. Fellows and universities feel that more promotion of the scheme could help increase the diversity of applicants who may consider applying. To enhance promotion and the range of applications the BA could consider:

- Undertaking more promotional activity around the PDF 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 and in disciplines that may be underrepresented including Business, Management and Economics.

Diversity

- We were asked at the interim stage of the evaluation to examine the Academy's diversity data. We have undertaken this and included our findings in the main report. Ensuring that British Academy schemes are accessible to all including across gender, ethnicity and institutional affiliation is important. We recommend that:
- The British Academy undertake a wide-ranging review of diversity data and the impact of their schemes across a range of indicators. The review should provide clear indicators for the Academy to measure for each funding round, enabling it to benchmark progress internally and externally.

Funding Model

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

- The teaching element of the PDF should be retained at 5%. Teaching largely had positive impacts on fellows and helped to ensure that they became more rounded

- academics without distracting them from the scheme's key objective of completing a major piece of research. The Academy may wish to monitor the 5% requirement more closely to ensure fellows are not expected to undertake too much teaching
- Tightening contractual 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
 - Research expenses could be increased from £6,000 to enable the PDF to undertake more fieldwork. There is a concern that the small pot of research expenses encourages 'safe' research in traditional countries. This in turn may prevent more ground-breaking research being undertaken.

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 PDF's stated aims:

- The scheme is recognised by individual academics and institutions for its focus supporting outstanding early career researchers. It is regarded as a **prestige award, achieved through hard work and a highly competitive application system**
- The scheme presents a very good opportunity for early career academics to improve their research skills and teaching experience (see outcomes below)
- The scheme would appear to improve an early career researcher's **prospects of obtaining a permanent academic post**. Nearly three-quarters of survey respondents had secured promotion and/or a permanent academic position

following their fellowship, and 81% regarded the fellowship as being an important factor. The anecdotal evidence from fellows and unsuccessful PDF applicants points to a highly competitive environment for academic jobs where an award like the PDF can make a difference

- Fellows and institutions recognised that the main focus of the fellowship is the completion of a significant piece of publishable research. While there are other benefits accruing from the scheme, this is the primary output around which many of the outcomes (see below) are generated
- The award **helps fellows to become more integrated into the community of scholars in their field** through the completion of their research and the networking opportunities provided by the scheme (see below)

What is the impact and significance of the scheme?

There is strong evidence of the scheme's impact across the individual outcomes identified at the beginning of this evaluation in the Theory of Change exercise.

Through the process of completing a fellowship, and subsequently in the next stage of their career, academics benefit professionally in one or more of the following ways:

- **Research skills are improved:** the fellowship allows academics time to explore and improve their research skills, ranging from highly specific and technical skills associated with their specialism to generic skills such as project management, report writing and presentations
- Teaching commitments, while generally not onerous, provide **opportunities for fellows to improve their own teaching skills**, including lesson design, student interaction and increasing their overall experience of teaching delivery
- The scheme provides a range of **direct and indirect networking opportunities** to fellows which allows them to access more funding and collaboration opportunities; to increase the audience for their research; and boosts their recognition among their peers
- The **evidence of leadership skills development is more limited** than for many of the other outcomes, although the

survey evidence does suggest that some fellows see the scheme as helping them to prepare for future leadership roles

- Fellows are **more confident and committed when it comes to developing and maintaining their academic careers** as a result of the scheme. They cite a range of contributing factors including the prestige associated with the fellowship, better academic networks, and improved research skills. More than half of respondents reported that the fellowship had been pivotal in them securing wider research opportunities
- The scheme **helps to enhance academics' ability to secure research funding**. Extrapolating from our survey, the subsequent amount of research funding raised by fellows over six years from completing the fellowship is estimated to be in the region of £73m

The direct evidence of institutional and sectoral outcomes is more limited and subtle, but this may well reflect the difficulties of gathering impact information at this broader level. Certainly, institutional stakeholders regard the PDF as being important for sustaining the social sciences and humanities,

where alternative grant funding for early career researchers is limited. The prestige that the British Academy brings to the scheme, and the rigour of the application process, are also significant factors.

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 early career academics to undertake pure and blue skies academic research.

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 standing it gives early career researchers in their discipline. 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 PDF scheme:

- The scheme, while highly regarded in its own right, **benefits from the broader prestige associated with the British Academy**
- Fellows appreciate the **additional training 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 areas for future improvement raised by both researchers and institutions was around the transparency of the application process. This is addressed in the recommendations section.

A wide range of disciplines and subjects were supported through the scheme as evidenced by application and survey responses. The

British Academy plays a key role in this which may be diluted if the schemes were managed through other funders. Evidence regarding the protection of endangered and vulnerable subjects was more limited although a number of modern and foreign language fellowship were awarded, widely recognised as some of the most endangered subjects.¹

research base in line with government and UKRI strategy.

To what extent does the scheme help advance the Government’s priorities for research and innovation?

There was limited evidence which explicitly linked the PDF scheme and outcomes with the Government’s priorities for research and innovation. Fellows themselves did not make an explicit link to government priorities when developing their research. In addition, universities did not focus their efforts in this area. Despite this the scheme does promote high quality and innovative research, supporting the growth of excellence in the UK

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<https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/languages-uk-academies-statement>