

Arts and Humanities Research Council's consultation on postgraduate funding, November 2006

Questions for consideration by those responding to consultation

We would be grateful if the Chairs of Subject Associations and Learned Societies could co-ordinate any responses to the report from members of their organisation, and use this pro-forma to submit their organisation's response.

General comments

The Royal Geographical Society (with The Institute of British Geographers) welcomes this opportunity to respond to this consultation on the AHRC postgraduate review. The Society is the learned society and professional body representing geography and geographers. It was founded in 1830 for the advancement of geographical science and has around 14,000 members. In preparing our response to this consultation, we requested comments from all Heads of Departments of Geography.

Below we provide general comments, followed by responses to the specific questions.

1. General: The proposals follow the pattern established by ESRC, in which decisions on individual applications are transferred to institutions - through quota awards and in this case "block grants", administered by institutions within a framework established by the Research Councils. This has some advantages - it devolves decisions on individual students closer to the departments and academics who can best judge individual applications, and in principle it enables a more strategic approach. It also has disadvantages, mainly in terms of administrative costs and in terms of an increasing drive to concentration; clearly some institutions will benefit more than others. For some Universities, it is not clear whether the mechanisms for making the initial allocation (for 5 years at a time) are sufficiently robust to be relied upon. It is very important that the algorithms for the allocation of studentships are transparent; thus expectation and changes can be planned for by institutions.

2. For Geography: Many geography departments are strong in the field of arts and humanities scholarship and host AHRC funded research and postgraduate work. That said, many geography departments are not located in arts and humanities units of their departments, and many operate as small clusters in units that also include physical, natural or social sciences. Thus the issue for Geography departments is whether their host institutions actually will include them in the process. There are some key areas of Geography that are definitely more suited to AHRC funding than, for example, ESRC or NERC (e.g. geoarchaeology – panel 1; cultural geography – panel 2; historical geography and history of geography – panel 4). Thus, university level models for allocation of AHRC block resources must include delivery units with active humanities research agendas no matter where they are located in the institution. Moreover, AHRC should discourage departments from defining critical mass in terms of departments. Institutions should be encouraged to define critical mass at the scale of the university as a whole, thereby also encouraging multi- and inter-disciplinary research.

Under the present system, a subject like Geography can be applied to by excellent students who stand a chance of success. Under the new system, the competition pot will be small (maximum of 25% at first), and in general Geography projects will only be eligible for funding where institutions make an *a priori* decision to support geography within the arts and humanities context. Furthermore, the small size of the competitive pot is a weakness of the quota system.

This can lead to situations where excellent students, who their own developed plans for research, fail to get funding.

3. In other respects, the scheme has real advantages over the ESRC equivalent. AHRC have explicitly rejected the 4 year (1+3) funding model; that model can be problematic because of the difficulty of predicting excellent PhD projects and candidates in their final year of UG degrees. Moreover, the proposal serves to foster institutional collaboration and long-term planning. The emphasis on the individual project is appropriate for this field.

1. How would a BGP bid be formulated in institutions supporting your subject area?

The consensus among those who responded is that any bid coming from an institution would come through Schools/Faculties. This would probably be to the detriment of Geography since it is not usually located in a Humanities School. Also, given the highly interdisciplinary nature of the discipline, it might not be favoured in competition with straight humanities subjects.

There does not seem to be a mechanism to ensure that less popular areas are supported and there is no strategic funding for students in individual disciplines at the national level. Potentially this could lead to disciplinary imbalance in the number of research students supported.

2. Does your subject area have an existing strategy for postgraduate research and training in the arts and humanities that they could contribute to a bid for BGP funding?

While individual department have research-training programmes for students in Arts and Humanities that are recognized by AHRC, these programmes tend to be variable between departments/institutions. Moreover, in institutions strategies tend not to be in place with respect to which areas may be funded as priorities.

If there is to be a quota allocation, it would be beneficial to include broader cross-institutional training, like ESRC.

3. Would it be more helpful for institutions 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?

Responses from departments to this question were mixed. Some departments responding argued it would be better to specify the number of awards, otherwise there would be inequities in the level of support for research students at different institutions. Other departments favoured that institutions bid for a sum of funding rather than a fixed award, so the funds could be divided according to need.

One sensible model might be to provide fixed costs awards and for AHRC to retain some funding for individual bids to support those projects that incur greater costs, for example for fieldwork, materials acquisition, language training etc.

4. What would be the advantages for your subject area of applying for up to 5 years' funding (as compared to the current annual competition system)?

One advantage would be the option to advertise studentships ahead of time and to plan, which might make it easier to recruit the best students, but this depends on whether the flexibility of appointing students is devolved to departments. Also, the time frame, five years, is long enough to enable strategic allocation in-line with University or subject areas strategies, particularly development/expansion of existing research training courses and programmes. However, these are disadvantages, institutional strategies may not be in line with, and (or) may make it difficult for, individual researchers. Furthermore, the proposed scheme does not seem able to respond to staff changes. Moreover, certain areas might not receive any awards for an extended period.

5. Would the BGP work more effectively if some flexibility were allowed to institutions once awarded? What would be the extent of any changes institutions might wish to make to the proposed distribution of awards?

While flexibility is always to be welcomed, the scheme would not benefit from external peer review and could lead to interdepartmental conflict. It could lead to the allocation of awards on institutional rather than academic grounds.

6. Do you foresee any issues with the implementation of BGP funding in your subject area and/or the sector?

Little evidence has been presented to suggest that the current system does not work. The primary justification for introducing the new scheme appears to be cost. The net result of the proposed change will be that the cost of administration will be shifted to the universities.

The new scheme will not guarantee that the best students are supported. The ESRC quota system, similar in some ways to the proposed AHRC scheme, has led to the concentration of awards in a few institutions. Moreover, there is no scope to support highly talented students whose chosen topics fall outside the expertise of staff in the few departments receiving awards. The policy of concentration of resources is based on a science model. This is not appropriate for the Arts and Humanities.

Of the ring-fenced areas for awards, only one 'History of Architecture and the Built Environment' specifically names Geography. Yet it is possible to see how geographical perspectives could lead to research in other areas, for example 'East and Central European and Balkan Studies'.

7. Do you have any suggestions for improvement to the model that would be beneficial for your subject area and/or the health of the sector as a whole?

A national view is needed to ensure the balance between disciplines is maintained.

To encourage interdisciplinarity in the broad areas of arts and humanities, it is important to recognize that Geography Departments are located in Science, Social Science and Arts Faculties.

8. Are there potential or existing collaborations in your subject area that would consider putting forward a collaborative BGP bid to the AHRC?

There are many examples of existing research links with Archaeology, Anthropology, Architecture, Sociology English, Politics, Law etc.

There is already scope within the present system to support students working with institutions external to universities.

Thank you for completing this pro-forma. Please submit your response to Jessica Bacon, at j.bacon@ahrc.ac.uk, by **3 November 2006**.