

The Royal Society of Edinburgh

Review of Funding for Postgraduate Research Students

The Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE) is pleased to respond to the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) review of funding for postgraduate research students. These comments have been compiled with the assistance of expert Fellows of the RSE, under the direction of the General Secretary, Professor Gavin McCrone.

Do you think that the current arrangements for funding postgraduate research students need to change?

Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA) data show that Scottish higher education has a smaller postgraduate research student (PGR) population relative to its size than might be expected. Significant further investment is, therefore, required to bring Scotland's PGR population up to similar levels to that of our English and international counterparts, in accordance with the goals of the Scottish Executive enterprise strategy, "Smart Successful Scotland", and the funding arrangements should be adjusted to facilitate growth of this vital population.

What are the approximate costs per student of post graduate research supervision

The costs per student of post graduate research supervision fall broadly in line with those presented in the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) -commissioned report by J M Consulting "*Costs of training and supervising postgraduate research students*" (www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rcreports/2005/rd01_05/). These suggest that the net institutional costs for postgraduate research training and supervision are significantly higher than current levels of home student funding. In the case of molecular biology or genomic projects, at least £15-20,000 per annum is needed to run each student whereas a standard Research Council award will only provide £1,200, which is also intended to cover the student's travel costs to meetings.

Should funding for postgraduate research places be associated with units of assessment used in the research assessment exercise (RAE) or funded subject groups used in the allocation of main teaching grant?

Funding for postgraduate research places could be associated with the units of assessment (UoA) used in the RAE, provided means of associating students with particular UoAs and other complexities are overcome without imposing more administration or reporting requirements on Universities

If funding is to be associated with units of assessment used in the RAE, should student places be allocated only to departments rated above a defined level, such as rising 3a, 4, 5, and 5* and their RAE equivalents?

We would support this selective funding approach.

Should there be a minimum allocation of funding to all institutions, with research degree awarding powers, to allow them to provide some postgraduate research places?

Contact with a community of research postgraduates is an important part of the educational experience at this level. There are, however, supportive models within institutions which encourage the networking of students from small departments. In situations where minimum allocations would result in funding for very small numbers of students within a department, the availability of such a network would be important.

Should SFC continue to take account of the number of research postgraduate students as a minor volume measure when allocating our main quality research grant?

We agree that the Funding Council should continue to take account of the number of research postgraduate students as a minor volume measure when allocating its main quality research grant, to allow for reward to follow effort.

Should postgraduate research places be associated with the subject weighting used in the main teaching grant or should there be a standard unit of resource for all postgraduate research students?

Postgraduate research place funding should reflect the relative costs of teaching and supervision in the subject, such as those highlighted in the J M Consulting "*Costs of training and supervising postgraduate research students*" report, and there is a clear correlation between the cost of research and the cost of teaching in a subject area.

What length of postgraduate research degree programmes should be supported?

We would support a 3 year postgraduate research degree programme; or a 1+3 year or 4 year programme, where the first year is eligible for return as a research rather than taught masters programme, as well as a model that would allow for part time as well as full time modes of study.

To support the Scottish Executive's Fresh Talent initiative, should the Council encourage the attraction of international students? If so, how can this be achieved?

Yes, the Funding Council should encourage the attraction of international students in support of the Fresh Talent initiative. At present, universities are turning away excellent overseas candidates due to lack of funding, and many more students would apply if more funding was available. We would however not expect to see resources diverted away from support for home research students.

Additional Information

In responding to this consultation the Society would like to draw attention to the following Royal Society of Edinburgh responses which are of relevance to this subject: *Scottish Higher Education Review* (January 2002); *The Role of the Universities in the Europe of knowledge* (May 2003); *The Future of Higher Education* (May 2003); *Inquiry into the Promotion of Scotland Worldwide* (December 2003) and *Cross Border Student Flows: Higher Education Tuition Fees* (May 2005).

Copies of the above publications and further copies of this response are available from the Policy Officer, Dr Marc Rands (email: mrands@royalsoced.org.uk) and from the RSE web site (www.royalsoced.org.uk).

January 2006