

HEFCE consultation on allocation method for postgraduate research funding from 2012-13

University Alliance Response

Background

1. In January 2011, the HEFCE Board agreed to allocate research funding more selectively by reference to excellence demonstrated in the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise. Consequently from 2012-13 HEFCE will cease to fund 2* quality rated research in two stages from 2011-12 and then completely in 2012-13.
2. HEFCE, other public funders (including Research Councils and charities), students who chose to fully or partly fund their study and universities share the responsibility for funding the training of doctoral students.
3. HEFCE's is the only funding stream that currently contributes towards the cost of training all home and EU PhD students, in all subjects: in 2011-12, the £205 million RDP supervision funding will be allocated by reference to 42,700 eligible postgraduate student full-time equivalents (FTEs).
4. The RDP fund is allocated relatively broadly by type of institution and geography, thereby playing an important role in supporting access to postgraduate provision, especially for students who pay their own fees.
5. Following the Board's decisions, HEFCE are proposing to alter the method in which the RDP funding is distributed. Therefore this consultation primarily seeks comments on proposals for:
 - allocating HEFCE funding more selectively on the basis of quality by changing the allocation method for the research degree programme (RDP)
 - introducing an eligibility threshold for an institution's RDP grant, whereby HEFCE will cease to allocate RDP funding if its value exceeds a certain proportion of an institution's mainstream QR.

Summary

6. Whilst University Alliance supports the funding of research on the basis of excellence, and we also support HEFCE's decision to fund PGR training on the basis of excellence, we do not believe that RAE results are an accurate measure of the quality of PGR training.

7. The RAE is a direct and robust measure of the quality of research but it was never intended to measure the quality of the PGR training environment. RAE results are, at best, a proxy indicator of PGR training quality and, even then, RAE results do not always correlate closely with the quality of the PGR training environment. Therefore, our primary recommendation is that an alternative set of indicators should be identified (one of which might be RAE results) in order to more accurately assess the quality of PGR training so that funding can be distributed on the basis of excellence.
8. In all considerations, University Alliance believes that students should receive excellent supervision with the appropriate levels of support provided. We believe that it is imperative that HEFCE develop formulae that ensures excellent research environments are rewarded and able to thrive, wherever they are found.

Consultation question 1:

Do you agree that for 2012-13 we should increase the value of the RDP supervision fund, by up to £35 million?

9. University Alliance believes that the RDP supervision fund is vital for ensuring the sustainability and health of the UK research-base. We therefore welcome the increase in the value of the fund.

Consultation question 2:

Which of the options we have described for linking the allocation of RDP supervision funding to quality (a threshold, or a quality weighting) best meets our aim of encouraging the supervision of students in higher-quality research environments? Why?

Option 1: thresholds

10. **Volume threshold:** University Alliance has consistently argued for funding research on the bases of excellence alone. We have strong concerns about the use of thresholds, particularly of volume or as part of a combination of quality. We believe that that for most disciplines, there is no discernable link between volume and quality and so any measure that included volume could result in support for RDP being removed from high-performing UoAs.
11. **Quality threshold:** We welcome the recognition that it is unlikely to be possible to establish robust, evidence-based criteria for the use of thresholds and would urge HEFCE not to pursue this option.

Option 2: quality weighting

12. University Alliance believes that a quality weighting is the fairest method for distributing RDP supervision funding. However, we also believe that RAE2008 ratings can only be used as a proxy measure for judging the quality of the PGR training environment. No evidence has been presented that demonstrates a correlation between RAE results and the quality of PGR training. Indeed, there are many examples of high quality PGR training environments in research units with 3* rated research and vice versa, the mere existence of 4* rated research within a research unit by no means guarantees a high quality PGR training environment. It is important for this funding judgement to be based on a direct and robust measure of PGR training quality.
13. We suggest that the feasibility of using additional metrics when deciding the allocation of RDP supervision funding is considered by HEFCE, because it is critically important to ensure that excellent research environments are recognised wherever they exist.

Consultation question 3:

If we used a quality score, as described in paragraph 22, to achieve differentiation by quality does a ratio of 1:2 seem appropriate?

14. University Alliance does not support the quality weighting of 1:2 for research activity at 3* and 4*. In order to support a quality weighting of 1:2, we would want to see evidence that the quality of PGR training is twice as good where there is 4* research in comparison to 3* research. We believe that this weighting is too steep and is not supported by evidence.

Consultation question 4: Do you consider that the value of an institution's RDP grant relative to its mainstream QR grant provides a useful indicator of the sustainability of postgraduate supervisory activity at whole-institution level?

15. No. There is no evidence of a correlation between the sustainability of PGR training and the total level of QR grant received by an institution.
16. PGR training takes place within research units, not at the level of the whole institutions. Furthermore, for valid reasons, the proportion of PGR training varies considerably by UoA making ratios based at the whole-institution level unhelpful. Therefore, as with all other areas of research funding, we believe that RDP grant should be distributed on the basis of UoA.