

Future frameworks for international collaboration on research and innovation: Sir Adrian Smith review call for evidence

Introduction

University Alliance brings together leading innovative and entrepreneurial universities known for securing UK-wide competitiveness through our focus on industry and the professions, practice-based teaching and learning and real-world research. We are large- medium sized institutions with broad discipline portfolios across both STEM and non-STEM, generating world leading research across all disciplines.

Alliance members are: University of Brighton, University of Central Lancashire, Coventry University, University of Greenwich, University of Hertfordshire, Kingston University London, Oxford Brookes University, University of Portsmouth, University of Salford, University of South Wales, Teesside University and UWE Bristol.

Methods by which the new funding arrangements can attract to the UK researchers of outstanding capability from around the world

There need to be measures which indirectly support mobility, such as collaborative efforts between governments to remove restrictions on movement, as well as directly through specific funding schemes. We are therefore pleased to see the government commit to ensuring that visa arrangements support international researchers. However, with the back-drop of Brexit uncertainty, a proactive and concerted cross-government effort to promote the UK as an attractive and welcoming place for international students, academics and researchers, which HEI's can confidently participate in and point towards, will be essential.

EU framework programmes have added significant value through facilitating researcher mobility. University Alliance has direct experience of the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) through our extended [Doctoral Training Alliance \(DTA3\)](#), which is supported by a €6.5 million grant from the MSCA PhD Fellowship programme. DTA3 will be delivered across a consortium of 15 universities across England, Wales and Northern Ireland to develop 83 early stage researchers from across the EU and beyond. DTA researchers are encouraged to collaborate on their work with colleagues in the cohort; attend annual induction, summer school and networking events; co-delivered training and development courses; as well as employer and industry events relevant to their chosen field. Thus, the programmes will produce

postgraduate researchers who are job-ready and can apply the results of their excellent research to deliver real world impact, in fields which address [strategically important issues](#) and Grand Challenges for the UK. We would be delighted to facilitate direct engagement between the review team and DTA3 participants and supervisors to explore motivations, experiences and barriers to seeking to conduct research in the UK.

Postgraduate researchers are essential to the future capability of the UK's research and innovation ecosystem, and must be nurtured and attracted to the UK across the full range of disciplines. Future frameworks should avoid a concentration of funding within postgraduate training support. Instead, funding for multi-institutional and collaborative doctoral training schemes, such as our unique DTA programmes, should be encouraged in future frameworks to allow the best researchers of the future to access a diversity of supervisors with a range of skills and expertise.

Future frameworks should replicate and enhance the range of activity provided through MSCA, such as international training networks for PhD and early career researchers, international mobility fellowships for experienced researchers and international exchanges of research staff. When building these methods into new funding arrangements, consideration should also be given to opportunities that will help to retain current UK-based Fellows that are not UK nationals, as well as attracting new talent. Other methods that new funding arrangements could utilise include expanding opportunities to access funding to cover administrative and relocation costs, particularly if these increase post EU-exit. In addition, it would be helpful if funding covered indirect and estates costs based on FTE. Institutions will be providing office space, access to both standard and bespoke facilities and, as with other funding opportunities, it would be very beneficial if all or a proportion of such costs are covered.

Methods by which the new funding arrangements can attract R&D investment to the UK, thereby contributing to the Government's 2.4% agenda

A key aspect of attracting inward investment and using public investment to leverage greater private investment is utilising and investing in our entire HE sector. The best research must be funded wherever it is found, and open competition should underpin every investment. In judging what is best, we must value connectivity within the research community and with the rest of society. A place-based approach to public investment in R&D recognises the value of connecting research and innovation to real-world economic, social and sustainability opportunities and challenges. Many of the challenges and economic growth areas outlined in the Industrial Strategy are global in nature, so linking research and innovation to regional policy and local industrial strategies can have benefits beyond local communities by creating alliances across geographies. It is essential that businesses see the value in investing from idea through

to market, and attracting R&D investment from businesses that partner with fast-growing, innovative SME's is also supported by a place-based agenda. Universities across the UK with strong industry links at a local and regional level are well placed to ensure that innovation activity is 'close to market'.

Place-based approaches need to become even more central to research and innovation strategy, with open, competitive, and peer-reviewed funding allocations. The Strengths in Places Fund is a step in the right direction, but some members have reported that where they have partnered through this fund the time to outcome from submission has been far too long. Although funding concentration is not an explicit policy, in many cases it is a reality – partly due to the use of unselective or closed competition allocation methods. Restricted eligibility funding mechanisms which prevent some universities from applying for funding means that matched investments that would be offered by these universities' strategic and long-standing businesses partners are not realised. This does not currently impact all our members based on their Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) region, but as regions change institutions will be looking at what this means for defining the region they are serving.

It will also be important to maintain and increase opportunities for collaboration between academia and business, such as consortia-based research projects through EU Framework Programmes and Innovate UK. Funding schemes which facilitate all businesses, large, medium and small, to realise the potential opportunity in the skills, knowledge and facilities in their regional HE providers would be welcome. How finance and IP is organised should be bespoke to the specific project or collaboration depending on what each party brings to the collaboration and the anticipated future direction and needs of the project.

The optimum balance of emphasis for any new funding arrangements; and the efficiency and effectiveness of funding for international collaborations

Future arrangements should focus on European collaboration, global collaboration, and Overseas Development Assistance in that order. Funding arrangements should mirror the main features of the agreement on the Horizon Europe and Erasmus+ Programmes in order to ensure high-quality pan-European collaboration and a commitment to funding excellence wherever it is found.

Funding and the number of calls should be increased to support collaboration with the countries identified in the Fund for International Collaboration (FIC) and directed to better support flexible, effective collaborations with impact. Funding should be directed at

establishing both new collaborations (e.g. networking and travel funding), as well as support for more established collaborations. In addition, better support is needed to provide strategic information and advice to institutions on the capabilities and research strengths of potential collaborators. There should be a shift from research projects devised at home being taken to overseas arenas for implementation, toward international partners presenting their greatest developmental needs to encourage and invite more relevant research projects to be funded.

We recommend that the overall focus for ODA funding arrangements should be ensuring sustained funding, but that there should be a clear commitment to increasing the funding for QR GCRF to allow for a broader range of projects to be delivered at scale. Committing to sustaining this funding over more than one cycle is also important to enable more long-term planning for potential projects. The potential that funding could be decreased, as well as increased, makes it difficult to plan how the funding should be best invested. As with other aspects of international collaboration, stability can be as crucial as funding. These measures would help ensure more institutions are incentivised to develop the requisite three-year strategies, as well as a better balance with post-award administration and monitoring. Whilst some members have reported that developing their three-year strategies has helped them to focus their activity, an annual funding allocation based on achieving a successful reporting outcome of the previous year makes long term projects difficult to run, or to allow any flexibility between years. Some of our members have also reported needing to write their strategies far in advance of calls and themes being released, making it harder to take a more strategic approach to delivery. A more considered timeline would enable institutions to take a more strategic approach.

If QR GCRF were to continue at the current level, consideration should be given to the proportionality of strategies and monitoring, and whether the burden of risk is subsequently being passed on to southern partners. Smaller funds should in theory allow opportunities for innovation and dynamism in the sector, but only if flexibility, proportionality and faster lead times are built in. Many of our members have reported finding the small amount of funding and long lead times for GCRF challenging. Consideration should also be given to the value added to the UK research base as well as the in-country impact, and whether a greater focus could be given to knowledge exchange activities, particularly with industries, in the criteria.

Consideration should also be given whether flexibility can be built in to GCRF core criteria to allow proposals to focus on emergent issues that are supported by southern partners, as well as current global sustainable development challenges.

We were pleased to see a high-level commitment to supporting universities to develop international partnerships and collaborations in IRIS. Whilst we do not wish for QR GCRF to be further hypothecated, there could be opportunities for greater collaboration between relevant government departments, Research England and institutional networks, leading to improved guidance to institutions both pre and post award. This could include, for example, support for facilitating connections with policy makers, practitioners and businesses in the Global South. As Coventry University have highlighted in their response to this review, there is considerable cost associated with travel, subsistence and staff time when establishing relationships with overseas partners. The scale and scope of the QR GCRF funding is one aspect that has been challenging for some of our members, but building up the deep connections suitable for ODA activity takes time and expertise, so whilst increased funding would be valuable it is not a quick fix.

Creative solutions and greater collaboration is needed to alleviate inefficiencies and address the costs and carbon footprint associated with developing these partnerships, in ways that support rather than penalise those institutions seeking to establish new and innovative partnerships. Whilst GCRF currently has thematic hubs, collaboration through regional hubs would add value through joint working to solve broader ranging issues, such as helping to coordinate UK researchers in that area, manage relationships more closely, share expertise and best practice, and reduce administrative burden.

The roles of Government, UKRI, National Academies and other organisations in defining the agenda for European and international collaboration and administering any new funding arrangements for such activities

In addition to reducing barriers and administrative burden with a single set of rules, EU Framework programmes have created a more level playing field through a strong commitment to funding excellence wherever it is found, which has been reiterated in agreements on Horizon Europe. Our unique DTA model was created to proactively remedy concerns from our members that they were being locked out of research council funding routes. As a self-funded model, sustainability is an ongoing challenge. Whilst applying for our successful MSCA PhD Fellowship programme bid, we also made unsuccessful bids to two research councils. We would not have been able to extend our self-funded DTA model to additional cohorts without the EU Framework Programmes.

We are extremely concerned that the swift timescales involved in developing new funding frameworks means that governance and agenda-setting will be shoehorned into existing arrangements which are less accessible to a range of institutions, such as the National

Academies. This would likely lead to further concentration and funding distribution that does not necessarily reflect the distribution of excellence. UKRI would be best placed to administer the funding arrangements, but with additional and transparent accountability on key principles relating to open competition, need and place.

The existing spread of schemes to support activities that foster international collaboration and researcher mobility across the research councils means the process is too inaccessible for many institutions and should be reviewed as part of future administration arrangements. Having the range of existing funding opportunities for international collaboration clearly mapped out by region, activity type and other key indicators would be a helpful and transparent way to identify opportunities and improvements.

Additional issues

The review should highlight the essential role of staff mobility and relationships in forming international partnerships, and that much of the activity that supports collaboration happens outside of or in addition to international collaboration funding. QR funding is a clear and vital enabler for staff to undertake the types of activities that identify, accelerate and help maintain international collaborations, including multidisciplinary collaborations, outside of specific projects. Participation in international networks, staff exchanges, conferences and a host of other activities also ensures that university research and innovation is applied in real world contexts and reaches a wider global audience. One of our members reported being able to use their limited QR GCRF funding to support staff in developing collaborations and networking with a view to gaining evidence and context to enable future applications for ODA funding, for example.

We are concerned that an increasingly insecure financial environment for universities threatens to undermine efforts to create the best possible environment for research and innovation. The higher education sector as a whole contributes to the strength of UK research and innovation. We urge the review to encourage the government to work with a range of institutions to consider the potential impact on the UK's research base in its response to the post-18 funding review.

Future funding models cannot ignore the significant proportional footfall of UK students that attend teaching intensive HEIs. These institutions attract a large number of academics trained in the research and innovation sector. This inevitably ensures that alongside excellence in teaching, these institutions are better placed at times to look at where research input is needed to underpin the teaching delivery. This demands that such institutions support their research activity to align directly to their students' needs and their regional demands. The adoption of

the civic and anchor role by such institutions will manifest in adjacent communities looking for research and innovation engagement alongside workforce development, and regions depend on this dual flow of output.