

Evaluation of Research Pooling Initiative

This paper invites RKEC to consider the executive's proposal for an evaluation of the research pooling initiative, and if appropriate, invites RKEC to advise the executive on the scope and design of any such review.

Recommendations

RKEC is invited to:

- Consider the executive's proposal for an evaluation of the research pooling initiative;
- If appropriate, advise the executive on the scope and design of any such review.

Financial implications

- Subject to the Committee's decision and advice the executive will need to allocate funding to meet the cost of any review of research pooling. The level of cost will be dependent upon the scope of the review.

Evaluation of Research Pooling Initiative

Purpose

1. This paper invites RKEC to consider the executive's proposal for an evaluation of the research pooling initiative, and if appropriate, to advise the executive on the scope and design of any such review.

Background

2. The research pooling initiative was developed to support institutions to establish collaborative research pools with the aim of growing a critical mass of excellent research in the relevant disciplines in Scotland, in order to compete effectively for funding, research staff and doctoral students both nationally and internationally.
3. SFC's original aims in funding the research pooling initiative were:
 - to enhance research competitiveness;
 - achieve sustainable critical mass in the Scottish research base;
 - better quality research; and
 - more attractive research environment.
4. Bespoke models were developed for different areas of the research base with investment, matched by the institutions, supporting academic posts, improved facilities and equipment, graduate schools and studentships.
5. The initial SFC investments (which total over £140M) were made in AY2004-5 and have now in all but a few cases come to an end (see Annex 1).

Pooling continuation

6. Council, at its meeting in [January 2014](#), agreed that 'successful' pools should be further supported by up to £150k pa (later reduced to £112,500) for an additional five years:
 - to sustain the progress that has been made through pooling
 - to continue to contribute to SFC's outcomes of an internationally competitive research base, and improved industry-academia collaborations and the exploitation of research (SFC Strategic Plan 2012-15).
7. A set of outcomes and success criteria were agreed, and the executive carried out evaluations of the individual research pools which were endorsed by RKEC (RKEC/14/14, RKEC/14/29, RKEC/15/11, RKEC/16/14, RKEC/by correspondence July 16). All pools were judged to have had some level of 'success' and invited to submit proposals for future funding.

8. The academic positions created in pooled disciplines were intended to be self-sustaining after the initial investment period. In deciding to make this continuing investment in research pooling, Council recognised the continuing relevance of research pooling to SFC's strategic aims, as well as the difficulties in sustaining central administration and support positions which enable the continued collaborative benefit of clustering research in a pool and continued central support to graduate training, knowledge exchange activity, international development and similar.
9. Continuation funding has so far been agreed for all pools with the exception of SIRE and Soillse (see Annex 1).

Pools today

10. The research pools continue to contribute to SFC's outcomes around world leading research and greater innovation in the economy as set out in the [2015-18 strategic plan](#) and are referenced in the draft Research Strategy referred to elsewhere on this agenda.
11. The pools are, where appropriate, key partners in strategic developments on a Scotland-wide scale. Examples of this role include the relationship between SICSA and the DataLab, ETP and OGIC and the role SRPe is playing in supporting the emerging proposal for a National Manufacturing Institute for Scotland.
12. The pools represent a platform for engaging the research community in Scotland in a collaborative manner as well as providing a representative voice. As an example, a recent Pooling Directors' meeting hosted the Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science to engage in a discussion of, and provide advice on the mitigation of, Brexit. Building on the Brexit discussion in that meeting, it was helpful to those present to recognise that pools (with ICs) provide a platform to represent Scotland's research and innovation capability internationally and that this role could be grown. The pools also recognised the potential to work together to share good practise in engaging with ODA opportunities.
13. The research pool directors have previously discussed the possibilities of inter-pool collaborations in researcher training, and other opportunities.

Impact of pooling initiative

14. There has been international interest in "the Scottish model". There are many reasons to believe pools have contributed to a strengthening of the Scottish research base. And as set out above, to support decisions on continuation support, the executive's brief reviews of the success of individual research pools. However to date there has not been an evaluation of the pooling initiative as a whole or broad critical testing of the positive perceptions. As a

significant and internationally recognised SFC policy intervention, it is appropriate that a substantial examination of its achievements be undertaken.

15. The executive invite the Committee to consider recommending such a review to Council, primarily to verify and assess the impact of the pooling initiative. Such a review would also help to inform the future role of the pools within SFC's Strategic Plan and Research Strategy, as well as drawing out examples of good practice and lessons for similar investments.

Review considerations

16. Should RKEC be minded to recommend such a review? Members are further invited to discuss the proposed review and advise the executive on its scope and design– we would particularly value RKEC's views on the following questions:
 - Should the review focus on:
 - an in depth analysis of the quantitative outputs of individual pools such as research income, academic posts, REF results, within their academic disciplines;
 - a high level programme-wide review focussing on the more qualitative impacts of the pooling initiative as a whole such as cultural change, perceptions of Scottish research and the benefits of collaborations;
 - the practical aspects of the initiative, for example SFC's role in development and management of the initiative, institutional engagement in the process, the different models and governance structures adopted by the pools and their relative successes; or
 - a combination of all of the above?
 - The review should provide an independent and objective evidence base. Should the review be conducted by a commissioned consultancy/ research organisation or should SFC invite an appropriate individual to lead an independent review following the example of Professor Graeme Reid's recent review of Innovation Centres?

Risk assessment

17. There are no risks associated with this paper.

Equality and diversity assessment

18. Subject to the Committee's decision and advice the executive is mindful that any evaluation will need to consider equality and diversity issues in its design. It is further recognised that any evaluation or review of research pooling presents

an opportunity for consideration of equality and diversity issues within research pools.

Financial implications

19. Subject to the Committee's decision and advice the executive will need to allocate staff resources and funding to meet the cost of any review of research pooling. The level of cost will be dependent upon the scope of the review.

Recommendations

20. RKEC is invited to:
 - Consider the executive's proposal for an evaluation of the research pooling initiative;
 - If appropriate advise the executive on the scope and design of any such review;
 - Make recommendations to the SFC Board.

Publication

21. This paper will be published on the Council's website.

Further information

22. Contact: Hazel McGraw, Policy Officer, tel: 0131 313 6657, email: hmcgraw@sfc.ac.uk.

Annex 1

Summary of research pooling investments

Pool	Initial funding	End date	Continuation Funding
SUPAII	£15.7M	07 2017*	£562,500
MASTS	£17.4M	07 2017*	£562,500
Soillse : Gaelic	£1.9M	11 2017*	TBC
Edinburgh Research Partnership (ERPem)	£9.8M	01 2012	
NRPe	£8.2M	07 2014*	
GRPe	£15.7M	07 2013	
SRPe – ERPem	£2.7M	07 2013	
SRPe total	£36.4M		£612,500
SAGES	£6.5M	07 2013	£612,500
SIRE Scottish Institute for Research in Economics	£9.4M	07 2015*	TBC
SULSA Scottish Universities Life Sciences Alliance	£27.4M	01 2015	£600,000
SINAPSE Scottish Imaging Network A Platform for Scientific Excellence	£5.6M	01 2014	£325,000
SICSA	£14.5M	07 2015	£600,000
ScotCHEM	£13.7M	2010-11	£560,000
Energy Technology Partnership	-		£450,000
TOTAL	£148.5M		£4.3M

* Includes no cost extension

Annex 2

'Success' markers

Enhance research competitiveness

- Research outputs i.e. peer reviewed journal publications/ conference presentations both national and international
- Grant applications/income

Achieve sustainable/ critical mass in the Scottish research base

- New staff posts created (academic and support staff including both technical and administrative)
- Number of post graduate students graduating and first destinations where known
- Size of the early career research community attached to project

Better quality research

- REF results

More attractive research environment

- The support provided for students and early career researchers e.g. through graduate schools
- New research materials developed e.g. research tools or data base
- New training courses developed/delivered
- Improved facilities, equipment or resources

Collaboration/engagement with business and community

- New products or interventions produced and benefiting industrial sectors
- IP, licensing, patents secured and spin outs created and benefiting industrial sectors
- New academic (including interdisciplinary) or business collaborations established both national and international
- Influence on public policy and practice
- National or international seminars, workshops, conferences organised
- Public engagement events held;
- Public websites, newsletters and other wider communication activity.