

Terms of reference: Independent Review of SFC's Research Pooling Initiative

Background

1. SFC's 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 Scotland, in order to compete effectively for funding, academic staff and research students both nationally and internationally.
2. SFC's original aims in funding the research pooling initiative were to:
 - Enhance research competitiveness.
 - Achieve sustainable critical mass in the Scottish research base.
 - Improve the quality of research.
 - Provide a more attractive research environment.
3. The Council set two essential criteria for pooling if it was to be successful: it must lead to better research; and it must provide a more attractive research environment for leading researchers. A key aspect of the policy was that any 'pooled' resources should be accessible to leading researchers and graduate students throughout Scotland.
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; and graduate schools and studentships.
5. The initial SFC investments (which total over £140M) were made from AY2004/5 and have now come to an end.
6. The SFC investment was matched by over £300M from institutions.

Aim of the evaluation

What do we want to know?

7. The review should be high level and summative, focussing on the delivery of the original vision of the research pooling initiative and the impact this has had on the Scottish research environment. It should be forward looking, allowing lessons to be learnt to inform future policy developments and potential investments.

8. The review should:
- Establish the impact of the research pooling initiative to date.
 - Consider the types of investment which worked well and why.
 - Consider the changing research landscape and how the research pooling programme sits within that environment .
 - Identify lessons for SFC's future investments in research.

Scope

9. The review should include all the research pools as well as pooling-like initiatives such as Scottish Institute for Policing Research (SIPR) and Soillse.
10. The review should give due consideration to the diversity of research pools and their unique circumstances – each pool was developed in a bespoke manner and on an individual timescale and budget with individual aims and objectives. For example:
- ScotCHEM and SRPe are relatively recently formed nationwide pools, each of which draws together three existing regional pools.
 - Soillse built on a less developed research base and was funded on a lower scale than other research pools.
 - SULSA focussed on a relatively easy to define (although large) academic base in the life sciences, whereas MASTS drew together a whole range of less easily defined disciplines around Marine Sciences and Technology.
11. The review should build on existing evaluation work including the executive's reviews of individual pools, self-evaluations and independent reviews e.g. ScotCHEM evaluation 2010.
12. We do not require evaluation of the quality of research generated by the pools. Existing research quality indicators will be considered.
13. Bearing in mind there may be insufficient evidence to provide a quantitative response, areas we would like the review to consider are:

Impact

- Have the original vision, aims and objectives of the initiative been achieved? Has the initiative made a difference and what is it?
- Have the investments satisfied the aims and objectives of the funding?
- Has Scotland's research competitiveness increased, and if so is that due to pooling?
- What is the extent and effectiveness of changes made to the culture and ways in which research is organised in Scotland as a result of pooling?

- What are the perceptions within Scotland and the UK of pools and the benefits accruing from them? What evidence is there to support these perceptions?
- What are the international perceptions of the pooling initiative: have pools made an impact on Scotland's reputation; have working relations improved; what aspects are other countries interested in/seeking to emulate; what have they improved on and why?
- What has been the impact of pooling outside of the academic sector, on policy and industry?
- Are there any unintended/unplanned outcomes or developments which built on the pooling initiatives?

Current environment

- In the current research environment, what is the perception of, and role for, the pools?
- Continued funding for research pools – how are pools developing in the current research and innovation funding situation?
- How have the pools evolved over time, what changed and why?
- What other ideas for this sort of initiative have emerged from others' perspectives on this work?
- How does pooling impact on the current focus on interdisciplinarity and challenge led research?

Lessons

- What lessons can be learnt, both good and bad, about making collaborations work effectively? Are there some specific pooling examples to support these?
- Did/does geography impact on or limit institutions' involvement in research pooling and if so how could this be overcome?
- What lessons can SFC learn from how the initiative was designed/ implemented/ managed?

Future

- If pooling has impacted on research quality and/or critical mass raising the competitiveness of the research base in Scotland is this impact sustainable without further investment?
- How does the pooling model fit in the developing research landscape? How can/ should pools evolve to fit that landscape? Are further pools needed?

Outputs

14. The expected outputs will be:
 - An independent report¹ to SFC which should provide evidence and analysis where available to enable SFC to make a judgement on the effectiveness of its investments. This should include recommendations for SFC on the development of this and future initiatives, and be suitable for publication.
 - A dissemination event or events to maximise the impact of the review process itself.
 - Dialogue with the university sector, supported by the report, to inform planning by the sector and SFC for the future of the programme.

Outcomes

15. The expected outcome will be an enhanced understanding of the impact of SFC's research pooling initiative and the opportunities of, and barriers to, university collaboration, and the pros and cons of the approaches that may be taken to inform sharing and adopting of good practice as well as development of SFC's future research investments.

Proposed approach

16. It is proposed that the review will be an independent review – led by a respected individual supported by an Advisory Panel and, administratively, by the SFC Executive. This approach has been chosen to:
 - Ensure independence, and transparency, allowing the SFC's role in the initiative to be reviewed too.
 - Raise the profile of the review.
 - Be credible across all stakeholders (academia, government, public interest and partners).
17. The individual leading the review would need to:
 - Have relevant knowledge and expertise.
 - Be based outside Scotland though be knowledgeable about the Scottish sector.
 - Have no direct connections with the pooling initiative or SFC.
18. The role of the Advisory Panel is to support the review lead, to assist in procuring and interrogating evidence and to help the lead to develop their own

¹ We anticipate that the report will be drafted/written by SFC staff under the direction and full editorial control of the review lead. This was the case with both the Hauser review and the Reid review of Innovation Centres..

views.

19. Membership could be drawn from RKEC, US RKEC, HEFCE/HEFCW or DELNI, Research Councils, and include an international perspective. Scottish Government would be invited to observe and contribute where relevant.
20. The review lead and the Advisory Panel will be offered appropriate remuneration and expenses.

Evidence

21. The review would be able to draw on existing evidence including:
 - Annual and final reports of the original pooling investments.
 - Executive's reviews of the above.
 - Existing reviews of individual pools.
 - REF analysis.
22. The Advisory Panel may also specify additional information which may be required, such as:
 - An international literature review.
 - Analysis of other national datasets held by SFC.
23. There is some potential for employing consultants to contribute to the tasks in this paragraph.
24. It is proposed that the review also draws on invited written inputs (through an open call). In the first instance analysis of these written inputs will be drafted by SFC staff.
25. The Advisory Panel may also wish to conduct a series of interviews with relevant stakeholders, partners, and participants in the pooling initiative. This may include for example:
 - Pooling Directors/Executive directors (past and present).
 - Academics/research students.
 - University VPs for Research.
 - Business organisations.
 - Scottish Government.
 - Joint funders.
 - International representatives.
 - Innovation Centres.
 - Current and former SFC staff.
 - Research Councils.

26. Following the model used by Professor Reid for the Innovation Centre review it is proposed that the interviews are conducted via attendance at Advisory Panel sessions
27. **Indicative** schedule as follows:
- **From October 2017** –Council paper; approval from SFG for budget; inform pools formally and consult with them and other partners on nominations for review lead; identify internal resource and collate relevant documentation.
 - **September 2018 – October 2018** – Agree and appoint review leader and advisory group; agree plan/ToR with advisory group .
 - **November 2018 – January 2019** – Initial call for evidence.
 - **January 2019 – March 2019** – Analysis of written evidence and (potentially) further call for evidence/consultants.
 - **March 2019 – April 2019** – Advisory Panel – oral evidence sessions.
 - **May 2019** - evidence analysis and synthesis.
 - **June 2019** – draft programme wide report considered by advisory group.
 - **September 2019** – final report and presentation to RKEC and Council.