

## **Research: summary of issues and developments**

- This paper summarises the current position on issues relating to Scottish research policy and development in the context of COVID-19

## **Recommendations**

- To note.

## Research: summary of issues and developments

### Purpose

1. This paper summarises the current position on issues relating to Scottish research policy and development in the context of COVID-19, for noting.

### Background

2. On 29 April SFC published a [Briefing Note](#) on the evolving and predicted financial impact on both the university and college sectors of the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. For the university sector, the headlines in that document included:
  - In [an] optimistic scenario ..., where the normal intake of new international students drops by half, Scottish universities face a collective operating deficit of £383.5 million in AY 2020-21.
  - In [a] pessimistic scenario ..., if there is a complete drop in new international students in AY 2020-21, universities could face an operating deficit of £651 million.
  - Even allowing for some new and returning international students, and further mitigating actions by institutions, we might still expect a significant deficit of at least £450-500 million.
  - COVID-19 will have cumulative, multi-year impacts well beyond AY 2020-21.
4. In the short term, the main impacts for research are on cash-flow from paused grants; disrupted recruitment and inhibited staff retention; and the interruption of research. This is likely to be compounded by significant falls in annual funding from charities and industry, amounting to tens of millions of pounds of research funding.
5. In the medium term, predicted impacts are a significant loss of research momentum, a reduction in the volume of new research grant awards from some funders and the creation of a “lost generation” of PhD students and post-docs whose work will be blighted. In the longer term, universities are highlighting the impact from the start of the new AY being a varied, but dramatic and sustained, risk to research capacity. If this is not externally compensated for, it will lead to hard sustainability choices being faced by universities, a loss of capacity and reputation, and a more limited ability to contribute to the post COVID-19 economic recovery.

### UK context

6. The challenge of COVID-19 causing a loss of international student income and a

threat to university research is UK wide. The UK Government announced, on 4 May, a reprofiling of £100 million of the English equivalent of REG funding, a reprofiling of Student Loan Company payments and measures to control the market in domestic undergraduates. No new resources have been made available to universities in England in response to COVID-19 challenges as yet.

7. At the same time, the UK Government also announced the creation of a UK Research Sustainability Taskforce: “DfE and BEIS Ministers will set up an advisory sector working group with the Devolved Administrations to consider how best to respond to the challenges universities face on research as a result of COVID-19, and so university research can continue to support the UK’s economic recovery following the crisis.” SFC’s Chief Executive and our Minister, Mr Lochhead, are members of that Taskforce and both are very active in that forum to help UK Government decide on a purposeful intervention that will benefit the whole UK research base.
8. The 29th May announcement of the (£10.36B) BEIS R&D Budget for 2020/21 included within it a re-iteration of the UK Government commitment to raise public R&D investment to £22 billion per year by 2024/25. It is not, at this time, clear what will be the nature of any UK Government intervention to support the research base that will be tasked with spending that rising investment wisely and which will be tasked with partnering with industry to encourage private R&D investment to rise similarly.
9. Whilst the hoped-for UK intervention is not yet clear, likely themes of contribution to economic recovery, increased sustainability and support for ‘place’ can be construed from the earlier DfE announcements.

### **Scottish Government**

10. SFC has been working closely with the Scottish Government (SG) throughout this crisis and has been helping Ministers to identify the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on our university research base. We have had very positive engagements with Government Ministers and with Universities Scotland as we have understood and communicated the risk to research itself, to the jobs and careers of researchers, and the value of research as a contributor to our national economic and social recovery.
11. On the 6 May, SG announced a “£75 million boost for Scottish university research”. This is a one-off SG payment to help mitigate financial effects of COVID-19. Following decisions at the SFC Board meeting on 4 June, allocations will be announced soon. Allocations are in the same proportion as REG, RPG and UIF funding, but will have specific conditions of grant and reporting requirements.
12. Mr Lochhead has established a small Scottish University Research Reference

Group to support his engagement with the UK Taskforce. SFC is providing the secretariat for this Group.

### ***Research Excellence Framework 2021***

13. The original timetable for REF 2021, towards which all UK HEIS were working, was:
  - Census date for staff: 31 July 2020.
  - Income and impacts eligibility: those recorded between 1 August 2013 and 31 July 2020.
  - Research outputs eligibility: published between 1 January 2014 and 31 December 2020.
  - Closing date for submissions: 27 November 2020.
  - Publication of results: mid/late December 2021.
14. The results of REF 2021 were to be used by SFC and the other UK Funding Bodies in allocation of core research funds (Research Excellence Grant) from Academic Year 2022-23. Funding models were to have been developed and consulted upon, allowing roughly three months between publication of REF 2021 results and announcement of AY 2022-23 indicative allocations in spring 2022.
15. On 24 March 2020, with the agreement of the four Funding Bodies, the UK REF team announced that the exercise had been put on hold until further notice and that the submission deadline of 27 November 2020 would no longer apply. A commitment was made that when a new submission deadline was announced there would be a window of at least eight months between the announcement and the new submission date. The census date for staff – 31 July 2020 – remains as originally planned.
16. A consultation with the sector on options for restarting the REF was undertaken in late April/early May and revealed an appetite for restarting REF with a submission date at the end of March 2021, rather than a more extended delay. The REF team is currently working to explore the detailed feasibility of this option. Decisions on restarting the REF will be taken by the four Funding Bodies in late June.
17. A March 2021 submission date would mean that there is the opportunity to use the REF 2021 results for AY 2022-23 funding as originally intended. However, as results would be unlikely to be available until April 2022, there will be an extremely tight turnaround in implementing this.

### ***REG review***

18. SFC staff have been exploring the impact on the current Research Excellence

Grant (part A) outcomes of anticipated changes to staff volumes (drawn from the Survey of Submission Intentions for the REF), recommended adjustments to subject weights and various potential changes to quality profiles. Previous RKEC discussions are informing our approach.

19. The pausing of the REF changes the planned timescale for exploring funding mechanisms. However, it is still possible that results will be available to inform funding decisions for AY 2022-23. Under this scenario, it seems unlikely that a formal proposal for sector consultation would be published before the start of 2022.

### ***Strength in Places Fund***

20. The successful wave one investments from the UK Strength in Places Fund (SIPF) are expected to be announced soon. We are aware that Scotland has been successful. The process for wave two is underway.

### ***Open Access***

21. The UKRI Open Access review is considering open access (OA) policies for research publications that acknowledge funding from UKRI. With the agreement of the other UK funding bodies, it also includes high-level questions to help inform the development of the OA policy for research outputs submitted to any REF exercise subsequent to REF 2021. Stuart Fancey represents the non-UKRI funding bodies in this work.
22. The deadline for responses to the UKRI consultation was extended due to COVID-19, but has now passed. Although work continues, the delays due to the crisis make it unlikely that UKRI can announce its revised policy during 2020 as originally planned.

### ***Research integrity/culture***

23. The revised [Concordat to Support Research Integrity](#) was published in October 2019. This gives rise to the expectation that institutions should: identify a named senior member of staff to oversee research integrity and ensure that this information is up to date and publicly available; identify a named member of staff who will act as a first point of contact for information on research integrity; and produce a short annual statement. The latter expectation will be revisited in the context of institutions' responses to COVID.
24. As discussed by RKEC in September 2019 (RKEC/19/17), a UK House of Commons Science and Technology Committee enquiry into research integrity had recommended establishment, by UKRI, of a new independent body to monitor compliance with the concordat and advise on any sanctions. The SFC executive have continued to engage with UKRI on how this recommendation

can fit with SFC's responsibilities. The schedule for this has been affected by the current crisis but is to restart in the next few weeks. As yet, the UKRI Research Integrity Committee has not been established.

25. A Scottish Research Integrity Network has been established by institutional representatives with an inaugural meeting in November 2019. Good practice and resources are being shared.
26. On 11 June, Vitae published [Research integrity: a landscape study](#). This work to develop an understanding of: the incentives and pressures in the research system; how these affect research behaviour in the context of research integrity; the extent to which the incentives are considered positive or negative; and how these perceptions differ across stakeholder groups within the UK research system.

### ***Other concordats***

27. A revised version of the [Concordat to support the career development of researchers](#) was published in September 2019. RKEC discussed researcher career development issues in December 2019 (RKEC/19/26).
28. [Concordat for Engaging the Public with Research](#). In partnership with other UK research funders, SFC continues to support the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement. At the funders' request NCCPE had prepared a 3yr proposal which included transition to an Expert Resource Centre with an increased focus on core and funders' needs rather than project work. Following emergence of the pandemic NCCPE were invited to re-write the first year of the proposal to address the exceptional circumstances. NCCPE have done this and the proposal was discussed and unanimously supported at the Funders Group on 29th April 2020.
29. SFC remains a signatory to the [Concordat on open research data](#) established in 2016.
30. The [KE Concordat](#) was published in March 2020. We have used our 'sector communications' tool to raise awareness and encourage universities to commit to the principles of the KE concordat. We will use the development year (AY2020/21) to decide what formal arrangements we may wish to put in place for subsequent years. There are, for example, potential links to the University Innovation Fund. UUK will run a UK-wide webinar in June.

### ***Review of coherent provision***

31. Ministers have commissioned SFC to review the future provision and sustainability of colleges and universities in light of coronavirus (COVID-19). This will include the provision and delivery of research activity as well as its funding.

32. This is further discussed in the next paper on this agenda. The Committee may wish to revisit their discussions of research issues in previous meetings this year (RKEC/20/02, RKEC/20/04) in the context of this review.

### **Recommendations**

33. The Committee is invited to:
- Note the contents of this paper.

### **Publication**

34. This paper will be published on the Council website.

### **Further information**

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