

RKEC Update January April 2021

- The paper provides RKEC with a summary of a number of recent developments of interest to the Committee.

Recommendations

RKEC is invited to:

- Note the content of this paper.
- Seek further information as required.

Financial implications

- There are no direct financial implications associated with this paper.

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RKEC Update April 2021

Introduction

1. This paper contains a selection of updates of potential interest to the committee since its January 2021 meeting.
2. The executive will continue to send notice of events or publications, for example, between meetings where timeliness is important.
3. The Scottish Parliamentary Election is to be held on the 6th May. The beginning of the pre-election period in Scotland on the 25th March has limited announcements after that date.

GCRF cuts as a result of changes to the ODA budget

4. UK Government Official Development Assistance (ODA) budget cuts mean that UKRI is being forced to consider reducing or reprofiling research grants based on this funding, including the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF). It is now apparent that there is a £120m gap between allocations and commitments which could mean that the majority of grants beyond 31 July this year are cut entirely unless reprofiling can be agreed, and no new awards will be made in AY 2021/22.
5. Only £125m in funding will be available next year, down from a committed budget of £245m. Mid-project funding cuts are very rare, as removing the remaining funding tends to mean few benefits are realised from the earlier funding.
6. Since FY 2016-17, SFC has offered allocations of GCRF to all Scottish universities on behalf of BEIS. The overarching aim of the GCRF is “to ensure the UK takes the lead in addressing the problems faced by developing countries, whilst developing our ability to deliver cutting-edge research”. SFC allocated over £13m on behalf of BEIS from the GCRF in FY 2020-21. In common with other devolved funding bodies, SFC has discretion to allow use of these allocated funds to the end of 2021 and has offered that freedom to Scottish HEIs.
7. We understand that there will be no funding allocated to the SFC from BEIS for GCRF in FY2021/22. We don't know if this is a temporary or permanent change.
8. The cuts to ODA research budgets are of a greater proportion than the cuts to the ODA budget overall. It is unknown what this means for the UK Government's commitment to be a 'global science superpower'.

ARIA

9. The [Advanced Research and Invention Agency](#) (ARIA) is the UK government's new independent research body to fund high-risk, high-reward scientific research. The intention is for ARIA to be led by prominent, world-leading scientists who will be given the freedom to identify and fund transformational science and technology at speed. Legislation to create the new body includes provision that the body cannot be dissolved for at least 10 years
10. ARIA will be separate from UKRI and will be designed to function differently, aiming to ensure strategic autonomy and flexibility in funding; leadership/programme managers will be given discretion to deliver funding in new innovative ways. Recruitment of senior positions is crucial; the high-risk and high-reward element is aimed to empower Leadership to set research directions. Funding may still be challenge/mission focused, if the leadership chooses. Recruitment for CEO and Chair – the only public appointments - is due to start in the Spring.
11. ARIA will be backed by £800 million of government funding, as set out by the Chancellor Rishi Sunak in the March 2020 Budget.
12. The committee will note:
 - There is no requirement to ensure experience of the devolved nations is included within ARIA's governance structure despite the organisation's UK-wide remit.
 - ARIA is not expected to be part of R&D place or levelling up strategies.
 - We understand that ARIA's approach to full economic costing has not yet been considered by BEIS in detail.
 - It is not clear what ARIA's focus will be, or how synergies or complementary links with UKRI will be ensured.
 - ARIA will be largely exempt from both procurement and freedom of information legislation.
 - Most recent House of Commons research briefing on ARIA [here](#).

Horizon Europe

13. The [agreement](#) reached by the European Commission and the UK Government in December 2020 confirmed that the UK will be fully associated to [Horizon Europe](#).
14. The UK will participate on equivalent terms as Member States and other Associated Countries. As with other associated countries, on very limited occasions there may be limited access to some topics under exceptional and justifiable circumstances. There is some concern that these sensitive topics may include areas of particular Scottish strength such as quantum computing.

15. The first European Research Council (ERC) grants within Horizon Europe were [announced](#) on 22 February and countries that are negotiating association agreements with the EU, including the UK, may apply to the calls.
16. UK participation in EU programmes and schemes has gradually declined in recent years, a reduction attributed to the uncertainty caused by Brexit. It is important to raise awareness that the UK is a full participant and that UK researchers can bid for funding and be involved in consortia as if the UK was a member state.
17. [Recent announcements](#) by the UK Government have provided welcome confirmation that funding for the first year of associate membership has been found without a need to seek a contribution from the UKRI budget for FY 2021/22.

The continuing impact of Covid on the university research base

18. The increased restrictions brought by the second national lockdown have had an impact across the research and innovation landscape and there remain significant concerns about PhD students and maintaining the pipeline of talent and skills, as well as the differential impact of the pandemic on some groups.
19. Many PhD students are not covered by UKRI's extensions policy and are facing uncertainty about how they will complete their studies as well as the availability of future positions for them to progress to, with knock-on effects on their mental health. Research-active staff are also facing challenges, losing huge amounts of their time for research as a result of the shift to online teaching and the necessary focus on student support.
20. There are real concerns about the impact of the pandemic in terms of equality, diversity and inclusion, with many institutions seeing a pronounced differentiation in those most impacted by the pandemic. While some people have been able to actually up their productivity in lockdown, applying for more grants than ever before, others have had to focus on caring responsibilities and their capacity has been significantly reduced. The impact on women early in their career is a particular concern.
21. However it is clear that there has been an amazing response to the research challenge presented by Covid and many in the sector have been able to react at pace, pivoting their research and innovation activities to pursue Covid-related aims and addressing urgent societal needs.
22. There is widespread and strong appreciation across universities for the additional £75m of government funding for universities made available through the SFC last year to mitigate the impact of Covid. Many universities have focused this funding on support for people including PhD students and early

career researchers.

23. The £20M of very welcome additional capital made available in the recent Scottish Budget update will be used to extend this PhD support as well as to protect jobs and develop important research. We would not be surprised to see some universities using a part of both this capital and the additional resource allocated in the budget, to protect jobs and maintain research begun with ODA funding, consistent with the issued [guidance](#).

A new UK Innovation Strategy

24. The UK BEIS Secretary of State has moved to scrap the UK Industrial Strategy and has disbanded the UK Industrial Strategy Council. The focus for the UK's industrial development is now UK Treasury's [Build Back Better: Our Plan for Growth](#) document which does not place significant emphasis on the role of universities. The document points towards a new Innovation Strategy that is due to be published "this Summer".

UKRI

25. At the time of writing we understand that UKRI's budget for FY2021/22 is still to be finalised.
26. The multi-year UK Government Spending Review, expected in November, will be an important focus to make concrete the promised long-term increases in R&D spending.

REF and future of research assessment

27. The deadline for submissions to REF 2021 was 31 March 2021. In partnership with the other UK funding bodies, SFC is working to ensure the assessment phase can be completed with results delivered in early 2022.
28. The four UK funding bodies have established a Future Research Assessment (FRA) Programme Board to oversee the evaluation of the current exercise and consult on the shape of any future research assessment. This Board is made up of senior funding body staff. An International Advisory Group is being put in place to provide external perspectives and advise on evaluation and consultation activities.

UK Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy

29. The UK Government has [published](#) a broad-ranging review in which the Prime Minister is quoted: *"Our aim is to have secured our status as a Science and Tech Superpower by 2030, by redoubling our commitment to research and development, bolstering our global network of innovation partnerships and improving our national skills—including by attracting the world's best and*

brightest to the UK through our Global Talent Visa”

Research Bureaucracy

30. Professor Adam Tickell, Vice Chancellor of the University of Sussex [has been asked](#) by the UK Government to lead a new independent review into research bureaucracy.
31. Professor Tickell has approached SFC and Scottish Government to discuss his commission and this approach is welcome. Given the nature of Professor Tickell’s commission by the UK Government and the devolved nature of research policy (beyond the Research Councils) we will look forward our discussion of his remit and ambitions for the work at the earliest opportunity.

UKRI Open Access policy

32. Before the Committee’s next meeting we expect that UKRI will agree a new [Open Access policy](#) for publications arising from research it funds.
33. The Steering Group for this work has included SFC (for the devolved funding bodies) and Research England as it is important to ensure coherence between the Open Access policies for future research assessments (post REF 2021) and UKRI open access policy. Broadly speaking, any publication compliant with future UKRI open access policy must be compliant with the requirement of the open access policy of any future research assessment exercise (though the converse need not be true).

Trusted Research

34. Following a recent discussion at Universities Scotland Research and Commercialisation Group we have sought to better understand the emerging UK Government policy thinking around [Trusted Research](#). We have discussed with relevant colleagues in Scottish Government and BEIS.
35. It is our understanding that there is work underway with UUK and others to ensure there is appropriate guidance and sharing of good practice in this area. A UUK Task and Finish Group is established , chaired by the University of Edinburgh’s Principal. We are aware that there are concerns in the sector, particularly around managing bureaucracy with export controls, due-diligence etc. and these will be considered by that Group. We do not feel, therefore, that there is anything specific for SFC at this time, other than to follow developments in this (reserved) area of policy. We would welcome any views from RKEC on this topic.

Risk assessment

36. The risks associated with any of the items in this update will be considered as

part of any papers inviting discussion and recommendations by the Committee.

Equality and diversity assessment

37. Any equality and diversity issues associated with the reports in this paper will be considered if decisions or recommendations are subsequently sought from the Committee.

Recommendations

38. RKEC is invited to:
- Note the content of this paper.
 - Seek further information as required.

Financial implications

39. There are no direct financial implications associated with this paper.

Publication

40. This paper will be published on SFC's website.

Further information

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