

## Consultation on Research Excellence Grant and Research Postgraduate Grant: Summary of responses

- This paper invites the Committee to note the summary of responses to the Research Excellence Grant and Research Postgraduate Grant consultation ([SFC/CN/01/2021](#)). This summary of responses should be used to inform discussion of the following two papers on this agenda RKEC/22/03 and RKEC/22/04.

### Recommendations

- Note the summary of responses

### Financial implications

- There are no financial implications

### Publication

- Consultation responses were collected in line with current data protection regulation. As some respondents only gave permission for SFC to publish information and excerpts from their survey response but not to include the organisation name, and a few others stated that their response is only to inform future development of REG and RPG and therefore should not be published, this paper as it stands should be treated as **confidential**. An edited version will be published on the SFC website.

## Consultation on Research Excellence Grant and Research Postgraduate Grant: Summary of responses

### Purpose

1. This paper invites the Committee to note the summary of responses to the Research Excellence Grant and Research Postgraduate Grant consultation ([SFC/CN/01/2021](#)). This summary of responses should be used to inform discussion of the following two papers on this agenda RKEC/22/03 and RKEC/22/04

### Background

2. At its meeting of October 2021 the Committee considered recommendations from the short life REG/RPG Review Working Group, proposals for consultation and the overall approach to consultation with the sector. In November 2021 the Chair endorsed a draft consultation document.
3. The consultation was circulated to the sector on 11 November 2021 with a deadline for responses of 12 January 2022. A copy of the consultation is available [here](#). 31 responses were received including 17 institutions. Three responses were disregarded<sup>1</sup>.
4. Where permission has been granted responses will be published in full on the SFC website.
5. This paper contains a brief summary of responses with a more detailed analysis in Annex A

### **Question 1: If it were necessary, what would be the implications of delaying implementation of REF 2021 results and changes to REG until AY 2023-24?**

6. While respondents recognised that any delay in implementation of REF2021 results would weaken the link between research excellence as measured in the REF and SFC's funding for research through REG, they also recognised that the delay to publication of REF outcomes until May would delay announcement of REG allocations and that this could be problematic for institutions experiencing volatility.
7. Dramatic changes in REG allocations, both upwards and downwards, required planning within the institution to ensure continuity and stability. It was difficult to predict how the changes introduced to REF 2021 as a result of Stern's recommendations would impact on results.
8. Only two institutions preferred that implementation took place as soon as

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<sup>1</sup> Responses were either blank or contained information which was not relevant to the consultation

possible, although with the necessary smoothing in place. A further three proposed a transition year while the remainder were either supportive, or at least understanding, of a delay if this was necessary.

9. The risk of changes to REF having unintended consequences on results and therefore on REG allocations was highlighted and there was recognition that a delay in implementation might be necessary should this occur.
10. Respondents requested that if there were to be a delay to implementation until 2023/24 that announcements should be made as early as possible in 2022/23 to increase their scope for additional planning. Should implementation go ahead in 2022/23, it was noted that transition arrangements would be important (see Q2) and respondents requested an early announcement of the overall budget for REG as well as confirmation of any transition arrangements.

**Question 2: Should SFC seek to limit downward changes in REG experienced by individual universities post REF2021 and, if so, what should be the scope of any adjustments made?**

11. All but one of the 23 responses to this question were supportive of some limiting of downward changes to REG allocations. A few argued the long-term benefit of these limitations for increasing stability and allowing longer-term planning, and mitigating against over-concentration. However, the majority were supportive of a shorter-term limitation of up to two years. Indeed the majority who noted a preferred timescale supported limiting this transition to one year, highlighting that, in a fixed funding pot, limitation of downward movements also restricts the upwards movements which would recognise and reward research excellence.

**Questions 3: You are invited to comment in your answers throughout the document on opportunities for and barriers to advancing equality and achieving inclusion. Overarching comments related to the aims of the public sector duty in the context of this review should be made here.**

12. A number of useful responses were received. These cover a large variety of views and topics, which will be helpful to SFC in completing an Equality Impact Assessment for REG and RPG.

**Question 4: How important (or otherwise) is it that the Scottish approach to underpinning research funding is in step with the rest of the UK? What elements of consistency (or distinctiveness) in SFC's approach influence Scottish HEIs' research competitiveness?**

13. There was wide recognition that Scottish institution operated within a UK-wide

landscape, competing with institutions in rUK for external research funding, PGR students, and research staff nationally and internationally. Overall there was support for close alignment with rUK, noting that significant divergence may disadvantage Scottish institutions and affect their ability to compete.

14. Some supported closer alignment than was currently in place, this was largely in relation to the quality weighing applied in REG a, and these views are further represented in Q7. However there was wide acknowledgement that, while close alignment was beneficial, some divergence from wider UK funding policy allowed a more devolved and place sensitive framework which could reflect Scottish priorities and challenges.
15. Two responses highlighted the advantages of distinctiveness in the Scottish system and the opportunity, especially in light of SFC's Review, to develop new distinct features in the Scottish landscape which could include new mission-orientated research, refreshed research pools with a focus on interdisciplinary collaboration, supporting research culture and the postgraduate research experience, and building on the work of the Scottish Innovation Centres.

**Question 5: In the changing research landscape, is the balance of funding between SFC's underpinning support for research and underpinning support for PGR training & environment optimal?**

16. While there was support for increasing the level of funding directed through RPG, a majority of responses were in favour of maintaining the current balance.
17. The importance of developing a future generation of researchers was seen as supporting the case for increasing RPG. However, most respondents who supported this increase agreed this should not be at the expense of REG allocations.
18. It was noted that REG supported activity which benefited the whole research community including PhDs and that, with many ECRs facing the same issues as PhDs, allocating the funding through REG allowed institutions the flexibility to ensure funding was targeted where it was most needed, rather than being focussed on a single community.

**Question 6: Views are sought on the principles proposed for REG and on whether the proposals within this paper are consistent with the principles.**

19. There was broad agreement with the principles set out in the consultation for REG across the 21 responses received to this question, with a couple of minor adjustments proposed. There was wide support for not concentrating funding further, and for recognising and rewarding research excellence wherever it is found.

20. Suggested amendments included the addition of 'predictable' to the first principle and greater emphasis on the role of REG in supporting research culture and EDI.

**Question 7: What are your views on whether the current quality weightings for 3\* and 4\* REF scores are fit for purpose?**

21. Sixteen institutions responded to this question along with RSE, UCU, Life Sciences Dundee and Million plus. As perhaps would be expected, there was a variety of views, from increasing the weighting for 4\* research to including funding for 2\*.
22. Increasing the weighting for 4\* to 4:1 would bring Scotland into line with England and would support world-leading research. Others argued that providing some funding for 2\* would prevent further concentration of funding in research intensive institutions at the cost of developing a wide diversity and reach of research in Scotland.
23. A slight majority felt the current balance of weightings was roughly correct. However, many encouraged SFC to continue modelling changes in quality weightings as REF results became available to ensure that changes to REF did not result in unintended consequences.

**Q8. What are your views on aligning the proportions of REGa allocated and the proportions of REF score elements?**

24. Seven responses (five institutions and two others) supported the current method of continuing to base the REGa allocation on the overall REF profile, stating that using sub-profiles would introduce an unnecessary complexity. However, ten responses (all institutions) supported aligning the proportions of REGa allocated with the proportions of REF score elements, noting that extensive consultation had gone into setting the REF weightings and that this should be reflected in the funding allocated.
25. RSE noted that if there were material differences in scoring between the different elements of the assessment then it would be appropriate to adjust the weighting accordingly. St Andrews highlighted that this was the case in REF 2014 with Impact and Environment scored "more highly" than Outputs and therefore driving a higher proportion of funding than intended.

**Q9. We would welcome your views on the balance between the elements of the REG formula.**

26. This question received responses from 17 institutions, four medical research charities and four others (Association of Medical Research Charities (AMRC),

RSE, Life Sciences Dundee and Scottish Graduate School for Arts & Humanities (SGSAH)).

27. Responses were split with six responses (all institutions) supporting the current balance, ten responses (five institutions, four medical research charities and AMRC) supporting an increase to REGc (although not necessarily at a cost to REGa), a further three supporting an increase to REGb *and* REGc, and one institution supporting an increase to REGb only.
28. The medical research charities and AMRC highlight that REG is vital to the sustainability of charity research in Scotland. Institutions noted that charity funding currently achieves the lowest percentage of Full Economic Costs (FEC) and that increasing financial pressures within institutions makes it increasingly difficult to justify supporting charity research.
29. Arguments against increasing REGc (especially at a cost to REGa) included recognition that some subjects, for example Arts & Humanities, were less likely to attract charity funding and therefore would be at a disadvantage. It was also noted that an element of research income (including from charities) was already taken into account in the REF Environment section and therefore influenced REGa.
30. SFC were again encouraged to carefully model any proposed changes to ascertain the impact on individual HEIs, and on Scotland's research system as a whole, prior to any adjustment being made.

**Question 9 also sought views on the income sources used in allocating REG b.**

31. All twelve institutions who responded to this part of the question were in support of retaining the current arrangements for research income measurement, stating that this encouraged institutions to seek diverse sources of research income, and incentivised the maximising of business and industry research income.

**Research Postgraduate Grant**

**Q10. Are the proposed principles for RPG appropriate and consistent with the purpose of the grant and the changing PGR landscape?**

32. All but one of the responses to this question either agreed that the proposed principles were appropriate and consistent, or agreed with the principles subject to minor suggested amendments.
33. A range of suggested amendments of the proposed RPG principles were made, including the following:
  - Stronger emphasis on the importance of PGR wellbeing

- Recognition of the importance of retaining and attracting talent into Scotland
  - Stressing flexible provision to support PGR students into a range of careers
  - A more specific focus on meeting the needs of the Scottish economy and Scottish society
  - Inclusion of the notion of growth and financial sustainability that goes beyond securing the pipeline of the next generation of PGR graduates
  - Recognition of the role of place in supporting the development of high value jobs across Scotland.
34. Several responses noted that postgraduate research is currently underfunded, requiring HEIs to cross-subsidise the costs of postgraduate research from other income. This chimes with responses to Question 5 above, where there was a high level of support for increasing RPG, although not at a cost to REG.

**Q11. We are seeking views on the purpose of RPG and its future role in supporting Scottish institutions to respond – individually and collaboratively – to the changing landscape**

35. Responses to this question highlighted the ways in which institutions already work collaboratively in this space and a majority were receptive to at least some further collaboration, with a number suggesting potential areas for such developments. Suggestions included a National Graduate School programme, alignment with Next Gen pools, and streamlining generic courses such as supervisor training.
36. There were some notes of caution, mainly around ensuring that developments were Scotland-wide and not exclusionary, and that partnership working should not be at the expense of institutional autonomy around the use of RPG, noting particularly the benefits of universities being able to use the RPG to respond to the specific needs of their unique PGR cohorts

**Question 11 also sought views on taking forward increased accountability for RPG, for example by linking to shared objectives or outcomes, and how SFC and the sector could work in partnership to achieve this.**

37. Responses to this section were fairly unanimous in their desire to avoid overly burdensome reporting. Some institutions saw this as an argument against further accountability, whereas others accepted the need for accountability but warned that it needed to be flexible, proportionate and manageable. Smaller institutions in particular warned about the need to be mindful of additional resources that would be required to enable reporting, and a range of institutions cited concerns about the resource-need associated with increased reporting requirements taking funding away from PGR support.

38. There was a range of views and little consensus on the potential form of any reporting.

**Q12. We are seeking views on how the RPG could play an increased role in improving participation of underrepresented groups within Scotland's PGR community, particularly within specific research areas where under-representation is most extreme, and how SFC's focus on widening access and participation could be supported by RPG in the postgraduate research student context.**

39. Responses stressed that any approach in this area would need to be evidenced noting that: reasons for under-representation were complex and intersectional; work would be needed to define under-represented groups and the barriers they face, especially in widening access; some useful data sources existed, but these may need further development – again particularly for widening access this is complex; and efforts in data collection should be proportional to impact.
40. There was support for sharing of good practice and building on existing strengths. The strengths of post-92s in widening access for undergraduates were noted (mainly by post-92s) and there could be opportunity to transfer this expertise to the PGR community.
41. There was a suggestion from one institution to adjust the RPG formula to provide more support for part-time students.

### **Recommendations**

42. The Committee are invited to note the summary of consultation responses and use this to inform discussion in papers RKEC/2203 and RKEC/22/04.

### **Equality and diversity assessment**

43. Information within the consultation responses will contribute to development of an EHRIA for REG and RPG as the policy develops.

### **Financial implications**

44. There are no direct financial implications

### **Publication**

45. Consultation responses were collected in line with current data protection regulation. As some respondents only gave permission for SFC to publish information and excerpts from their survey response but not to include the organisation name, Annex A will be withheld from publication on the SFC website.



## Further information

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