



Consultation on Allocation Method for Postgraduate Research Funding from 2012-13

1994 Group response to the HEFCE consultation on allocation method for postgraduate research funding.

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The following is the 1994 Group's response to HEFCE's consultation on allocation method for postgraduate research funding. For more detailed information please refer to the individual responses of our member institutions.

Members of the 1994 Group are: University of Bath, Birkbeck University of London, Durham University, University of East Anglia, University of Essex, University of Exeter, Goldsmiths University of London, Institute of Education University of London, Royal Holloway University of London, Lancaster University, University of Leicester, Loughborough University, Queen Mary University of London, University of Reading, University of St Andrews, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of Surrey, University of Sussex and University of York.

Consultation question 1:

Do you agree that for 2012-13 we should increase the value of the Research Degree Programme (RDP) supervision fund, by up to £35 million?

Yes, this is appropriate; the RDP fund is a vital resource for PGR students and for capacity building in UK HE. Increasing the fund will send the right messages about the importance of research students to current and future research activity within universities, and about the importance of research to the future of the UK.

This would be a welcome increase, however considering potential increases in the number of PhD students in the UK this may result in an overall decrease of the basic unit of resource.

Consultation question 2:

Which of the options we have described for linking the allocation of RDP supervision funding to quality (a threshold, or a quality weighting) best meets our aim of encouraging the supervision of students in higher-quality research environments? Why?

From the two options outlined, option 2 quality weighting is the preferred option. By providing a direct link to quality we believe this would best meet the aim of encouraging the supervision of students in higher-quality research. Such a system would also make it easier to more directly target departments with identified strengths.

The 1994 Group is a strong advocate of maintaining research concentration based on excellence by funding the best research. However we would argue that research supervision may also benefit from recognising 2* work within the best 3* and 4* rated departments. Research staff with work of 2* quality are often promising researchers at an earlier stage of their career who are able to devote more time to the supervision of students and are excellent supervisors.

In developing an allocation method for the RDP based on quality it should be remembered that institutions took different approaches to selecting staff to include as part of the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise with some institutions taking a highly selective approach to achieve a high result. Adverse funding effects of such selectivity is avoided in the calculation of QR funding by using submission headcount as a multiplier. We suggest a similar measure is used in allocating RDP funds.

We are aware of a weakness in the proposed methodology in the weighted example provided. Being based primarily on the proportion of 3* to 4* research this does not currently take into consideration the overall proportion of an institution's research in the 3* and 4* bands. We would urge that the methodology used to link the RDP funding to quality consider the overall proportion of work in the highest quality bands.

It is difficult to comment properly on option 1, thresholds, considering the brief details provided. However, this is not our preferred option as threshold levels are likely to lead to a debate on levels set and it is likely to be controversial and difficult to manage. It might also damage good departments through removing funding altogether.

Consultation question 3:

If we used a quality score, as described in paragraph 22, to achieve differentiation by quality does a ratio of 1:2 seem appropriate?

Research of 3* and 4* quality stems from excellent research environments - the best environments for supervising research students. Therefore, the ratio used to allocate funding on quality should not seek to greatly differentiate between 3* and 4* research in the allocation of RDP funding. We would recommend that there is no difference in the funding amount allocated against 3* and 4* funding. Should differential funding be introduced this should be at a level of 1:2 and no greater.

Please refer to the responses of individual institutions for the perspectives of particular member universities on this matter.

Consultation question 4:

Do you consider that the value of an institution's RDP grant relative to its mainstream QR grant provides a useful indicator of the sustainability of postgraduate supervisory activity at whole-institution level?

This would potentially provide a useful indicator of the sustainability of postgraduate supervisory activity at whole-institution level.

A high quality research environment is central to the ability of institutions to provide high quality PGR training and the QR grant provides an index of the concentration of excellent research. Linking the RDP grant to the QR grant would increase the likelihood that supervision takes place within strong research teams. However, this may be of less importance if research funding moves towards a higher quality environment (e.g. 3* and 4* only) as some institutions will no longer be eligible for funding. Should the QR allocation method change in future we would recommend re-consulting on this matter.

There is potential limitation to this method which should be highlighted. The funding ratios of 3* and 4* research are not proposed to be consistent between the QR and the RDP. By linking a maximum level of RDP funding to the volume of 3* and 4* research, a cap on the number of PGR FTEs that can be funded at each institution would in effect be created. Therefore, capping RDP funding at a level proportional to mainstream funding might not be a fair methodology.

We also wish to take this opportunity to recommend that once PhD student numbers reach the current threshold for RDP support funding should not be removed altogether as is currently the case. Instead, funding up to that level should be provided.