

Nurse Review of Research Councils: Call for Evidence

Response Form

Please state whether you are responding as an individual, or on behalf of an organisation:

On behalf of an organisation: [GuildHE](#) and the [Consortium for Research Excellence, Support and Training \(CREST\)](#)

Please write here your name/ the name of your organisation and contact details. This would help us to contact you if we have further questions.

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Please provide evidence and views in relation to the following themes:

1. Strategic decision-making

Closer alignment between research councils is welcomed, both within and beyond the UK (for example via the European Research Area and Horizon 2020) particularly for smaller, more specialised institutions where there are pockets of highly specialised work that is taking place alongside interdisciplinary collaborations. If these collaborations are to be maintained and developed further GuildHE and CREST would wish to see the 'Grand Challenge' and any associated themes remain relatively consistent, as well as sufficiently broad to accommodate a variety of approaches to major research questions.

2. Collaborations and partnerships

The stated goal of the RCUK to encourage greater collaboration between researchers, groups and HEIs is to be commended, and we have been pleased to see funding allocated for networks and a number of research festivals that address the need for a soft research infrastructure, early discussion and showcasing, which creates the conditions for collaborative working. There remains a tendency, however, to focus RCUK funding on existing, developed relationships between HEIs and networks as opposed to those that are based around emerging research; this is

particularly true with respect to Doctoral Training Centres and Partnerships (DTCs and DTPs), which further concentrate research funding for PhD students and limits the possibility of third sector organisations engaging with researchers and PhD students. We suggest that RCUK requires a mechanism to encourage DTCs and DTPs to be consistent with REF and bring in 'excellence wherever it occurs'. Smaller amounts of seed-funding for emerging interdisciplinary groups (often involving multiple councils) and areas of research would be particularly useful in encouraging collaboration – in particular for projects involving SME partners – that can bear fruit in the medium to long term.

For example, the CREST group of small and specialist institutions put together a Block Grant Partnership (BGP) 'CREST+' application (led by the University of Winchester and involving 13 HEIs) to the AHRC in 2013 wherein multi-faculty universities with a more established record with RCUK grant funding acted as hubs, and specialist institutions with particular strengths in art and design also contributed their supervisory expertise and brought with them access to new and exciting partner organisations and SMEs: this partnership would have allowed a significant number of such organisations to co-host PhD students and to contribute to developing projects. However, CREST+ was not funded on the grounds that it was thought to fit more in a capacity building strand, although the broader infrastructure of the [CREST network](#) (funded by the [21 participating institutions](#)) had been in place with an established and functioning governance structure and a series of skills training events and co-investments since 2009. CREST+ was, perhaps, a 'newer' and hence riskier proposition for the AHRC and RCUK to consider, but it had the potential to reach a different mix of PhD students, to bring together a group of supervisors with particular research specialisms, to work with specialist universities in Europe and encourage regional and international mobility of researchers and PhD students, and to engage locally and regionally-based partner organisations and SMEs that would not normally have the opportunity to engage with the RCUK owing to their scale and / or location (these SMEs stand to benefit greatly from interactions in DTC and DTPs, and subsequently from collaborative partnerships; these expose them to national and international research discourses and networks, and improve the achievable impacts of the research itself.) While we recognise the need to support on-going, established research partnerships between research intensive institutions (like those funded through [BGP2](#)), we would also like to see the net cast wider when thinking about the RCUK's impact on the broader research landscape in the UK and internationally.

3. Balance of funding portfolio

GuildHE and CREST considers the dual funding system to be absolutely vital to ensuring that 'pure' or blue skies research is funded alongside more developed projects and practical interventions and engagement. The recent REF2014 demonstrated that, despite receiving a tiny proportion of HEFCE QR funding (less than 0.43% percent) - and a similarly tiny proportion of RCUK funding - GuildHE and CREST members are producing excellent research with significant impacts for a variety of research users and communities. Of the top ten UK institutions to win the largest percentage increase in their research funding, five were GuildHE and CREST members; the average percentage improvement linked to funding for

smaller and more specialised institutions was around 70%, although the total income remains small as we have pointed out above.¹ Despite this slight shift in the actual amount of funding for smaller and specialist institutions with 'islands of excellent research', with respect to RCUK funding remains intensely concentrated elsewhere.

GuildHE and CREST believe that interdisciplinary research is not adequately covered by RCUK at the moment. Funding themes and subsequent awards often appear arbitrary, for example around health and wellbeing agendas, which may cross a number of different councils. This relates to broader issues around the utilisation of arts, humanities and social sciences within the sciences to address challenges (for example, vis-à-vis emerging networks like the CREST-led Countryside and Agricultural Interdisciplinary Research Network ([CAIRN](#))). Many GuildHE and CREST members are also affected by the fact that the AHRC's total allocation is significantly less than the other research councils (the 2015/16 allocation amounts to only 3.7% of the total RCUK allocations) which is then split between a number of very different research fields, and by the fact that the AHRC receives no capital funding, severely hampering development of research in emerging and high-value creative industries.²

Our members are committed to engaging with the RCUK Grand Challenges and to continue to develop meaningful projects built on new and exciting research, and are keen to continue discussing how their individual and collaborative portfolios of research can be aligned with and, ultimately, supported by RCUK to a greater extent in the short, medium and long term. GuildHE and CREST proposes that, in order to encourage meaningful, long-term cross and inter-disciplinary collaborations, RCUK needs a regular annual budget for and programme of cross-council calls orientated towards 'Grand Challenges' as opposed to *ad hoc* calls that predict the types of projects and institutions that can apply on a short-term basis.

4. Effective ways of working

GuildHE and CREST members have some concerns about the peer review systems operated by the RCUK. We question whether the pool of peer reviewers is sufficiently large, and the process for appointing reviewers encourages inter and cross-disciplinary research. There is a danger in terms of preconceptions about issues including methodologies, deliverables, etc. in the sense that peer reviewers may not be trained to identify differences between fixable faults and fundamental flaws, and hence reject bids with transformative potential and impact because they are approaching the research questions from a narrow disciplinary bias.

CREST and GuildHE Members would suggest that RCUK adopt a two-stage bidding process (similar to the Leverhulme Trust) for certain calls (currently, the responsive mode approach is only deployed for some special calls). This would save a vast

¹ Click [here](#) for further information on GuildHE Members' performance in REF2014; [here](#) for significant report prepared by GuildHE and CREST in partnership with the OECD focusing on the impact of small and specialist HEIs on the broader innovation ecosystem; and [here](#) for a recent GuildHE briefing on research and innovation, offering some examples of past and current research).

² See www.gov.uk/government/publications/science-and-research-funding-2015-to-2016 and more specifically the table at www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/278326/bis-14-p200-science-and-research-budget-allocations-for-2015-to-2016.pdf for further detail on this balance.

amount of researchers' (and reviewers') time. Shorter first stage applications in the responsive mode can be really radical, and overcome the limitations of the current approach in which a consensus of reviewers is required: this helps RCUK to avoid funding only 'safe' and predictable research that functions in established disciplinary channels, and missing out emerging research of great significance. The Gates Foundation approach of taking forward a project if one experienced reviewer gives a good review, irrespective of other reviewers, offers a potential model, and would allow really novel projects to be funded.

5. Any other comments?

Although we fully endorse RCUK and fellow research councils allocating funding linked solely to the excellence of the research, GuildHE and CREST members would like to reiterate the point that recent years have witnessed a further geographical concentration of research funding.³ This is a consequence not only of RCUK funding patterns but of the inclusion of a threshold to the Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF) in 2010 that barred many small and specialist institutions from funding that supports research with regional and local innovations and impacts and / or that is directly engaged with particular industries in which SMEs are key partners; the restructuring of the RDA / LEP context has further compounded the situation. Certain regions and communities are, as a result, suffering from a lack of access to such funding, creating an unbalanced research system orientated towards London and the South East. We are not suggesting a revision to the Haldane principle, but would like to highlight this with respect to the way RCUK funding interacts with the UK's overarching research and innovation system as it stands at present.

The closing date for responses to this call for evidence is **Friday 17 April 2015 at 23:45**.

Please provide your response in Microsoft Word format. In order to be considered, submissions should be no longer than 3000 words.

Please email or post the completed response form to:

Email: nursereview@bis.gsi.gov.uk

Postal Address:

Nurse Review Secretariat

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5/ Victoria 1

Department for Business, Innovations and Skills

1 Victoria Street

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³ See in particular *Encouraging a British Invention Revolution: Sir Andrew Witty's Review of Universities and Growth*, October 2013: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/249720/bis-13-1241-encouraging-a-british-invention-revolution-andrew-witty-review-R1.pdf

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BIS/15/126RF