

Monday, 30 November 2015

GuildHE Response to AHRC Consultation on the Next Phase of Doctoral Training

GuildHE¹ and its research network CREST – Consortium for Research Excellence Support and Training² - submitted the following response to the AHRC today.

The full proposal document is available on the AHRC website:

<http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/newsevents/news/nextphaseoffundedstudentships/>

Survey Question 2³: Is 50:50 match-funding the appropriate level required as part of any bid to the DTP call?

Whilst 50:50 match funding has been used amongst some institutions successfully on other schemes, this level would present smaller and specialist institutions with a significant challenge. Raising the necessary funds to reach a 50:50 requirement would be particularly challenging where institutions are not in receipt of substantial QR funding, and are therefore reliant on other external and institutional funding to conduct research; a 50:50 match for a DTP may restrict the scope for other activities which are essential to the overall research environment at those institutions. It may also be comparatively harder for smaller and specialist institutions, and those with more concentrated pockets of research excellence, to raise external funds for these kinds of activities; they have not got the critical mass and broad-based networks of larger institutions, and should not be put at a disadvantage as a result of their character.

Furthermore, it would be counter-productive to the stated aim of the AHRC to broaden participation in the DTP scheme to impose a blanket financial commitment for match-funding; those that cannot meet it will be deterred from getting involved, regardless of the excellence of their research or their potential collaborative value in terms of disciplinary reach and innovative practice. As the current DTPs and CDTs have co-funded less than 40% (£67m) of the total value of the scheme (£170m) across all of the partnerships, we would welcome reflection on the appropriateness of insisting on a blanket 50:50 match for all partnerships.

Survey Question 3: Are there any significant obstacles to all bids being multi-university collaborations in the next call?

We welcome the requirement that DTPs in the next round are collaborative and multi-university. Smaller and specialist universities rarely have the capacity to host a DTP on their own, unlike larger institutions, and this move will go some way towards diversifying the institutions involved in DTPs and spreading the reach of RCUK funding.

¹ GuildHE is one of the two officially recognised representative bodies for Higher Education in the UK.

² CREST is a sub-association of GuildHE, bringing together 22 smaller and specialist research active higher education institutions in the UK: www.crest.ac.uk

³ Question 1 asked for contact information only.

However, we identify some extant barriers to participation of smaller and specialist universities in these partnerships, and we feel that it is essential that the AHRC seek to minimise or remove these. They include; existing partnerships being a 'closed shop'; a lack of encouragement to secure a diversity of partners; avoidance of partnerships which are perceived as riskier, in spite of a track record of co-working and excellent research.

To ensure the full diversity of institutions may take part in collaborative bids, the AHRC should create conditions for encouraging inclusion. The principle of supporting research excellence wherever it is found should be upheld, and collaborators should be encouraged to and rewarded for seeking out the best partners and building on their expertise, not simply forming the same partnerships over again. To this end we note the idea of 'proposal surgeries' and would welcome such initiatives to broker partnerships.

Collaborations which may be perceived as riskier - such as partnerships involving institutions not currently in receipt of RCUK fund in large quantities, or who have pockets of research excellence and will potentially need to gather in larger numbers to achieve critical mass and subject spread - should be considered. Smaller and specialist institutions, such as York St John University, have demonstrated world leading arts and humanities research in the recent Research Excellence Framework, and these institutions can also demonstrate excellent research skills development and high satisfaction rates in sector wide analyses such as the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey.

Whilst there may be some risk attached to supporting less well-tested collaborations and partnerships, they have the potential to provide innovative approaches and bring excellent research practice to the fore. As we have demonstrated through CREST - Consortium for Research Excellence, Support and Training - collaborations of this kind can be extremely fruitful and deliver benefits for the sector through exploiting their niche; our current Jisc funded project (<http://crest.ac.uk/blog/>) for developing research data management systems for diverse institutions is a good example of co-creation amongst a large but collegiate group of institutions.

Finally we would suggest that the AHRC consider including a criteria for funding DTPs that these partnerships are made up of more diverse HEIs. This would support the stated aim of this new call to not 'further ... concentrate access to AHRC funding'.

Survey Question 4: Do you agree with the removal of the cap on the number of studentships that can be requested (previously 60 p.a.)?

If the removal of the cap was to result in more equitable opportunities for all institutions which can demonstrate research excellence to access AHRC studentships, this could be a positive move.

However this step may skew the landscape and create 'mega-DTPs' which potentially absorb large allocations of a restricted funding pot, further concentrating the available resource. It could also potentially result in partnerships having a greater disparity of capacity within themselves, leaving smaller and specialist institutional partners as a poor cousin of those in the partnership who have the capacity to take many more students.

Lifting the cap alone will not help the full diversity of institutions to be involved in the scheme; in conjunction with other criteria and initiatives to ensure greater equality of opportunity for HEIs to enter DTPs it might be beneficial.

Survey Question 5: In the previous call, the minimum capacity of a bid was 40 studentships p.a. for DTPs. Is this level still appropriate?

Whilst it is recognised that there is a need to maximise 'economies of scale', smaller cohorts may deliver more innovative results by enabling a wider range of partnerships which include smaller institutions, and enable PhD students to access opportunities where excellent research and excellent academics in their field are located.

In his review of the research councils, Sir Paul Nurse makes the point: 'Doctoral training programmes if too inflexibly applied can prevent graduate students being supervised by quality researchers who are not part of such programmes. Mechanisms should be in place to prevent this unfortunate outcome, by maintaining diversity in the support available for graduate students' (Sir Paul Nurse, 'Ensuring a successful research endeavour', BIS, 2015, p.18). We would argue for such flexibility being embedded in DTP schemes from the outset, and encourage the AHRC to consider how minimum and maximum student caps facilitate or hinder such flexibility.

These arguments notwithstanding, if there is an evidence-base from past experience to support a minimum size of DTP, this would seem sensible. However we would not wish for convenience to take precedence over the stated desire to avoid further concentration of funding in the arts and humanities.

Survey Question 6: Are there additional factors we should consider in relation to the introduction of specialist subject networks across DTPs?

We welcome the opportunity for successful DTPs to propose subject networks which have a value to students nationally. To leverage these opportunities for the benefit of UK research in the arts and humanities we would like such specialist research training networks to be made more accessible to non-AHRC funded students as they are relevant to their research area.

Such networks would particularly benefit specialist partners within DTPs, drawing on their expertise and enabling large providers to learn from excellent practice / ethos around doctoral provision which is often a distinctive feature of smaller and specialist HEIs. Such cross-cutting collaborations may also foster collegiality in an increasingly competitive environment. Both these principles - preparedness to learn from all partners and collegiality - should be central to funded DTPs.

While there is a role for these, it is also important to retain generic training which facilitates learning across discipline boundaries leading to better rounded PhDs.

Survey Question 7: Should targets be set for leveraging external sources of funding for studentships (i.e. for jointly funded PhDs with non-HE funding sources)?

Whilst we understand the impetus for leveraging external sources of funding (and in-kind support) we do not see the benefit of establishing an arbitrary target for such activity.

Smaller and specialist HEIs have a good track record of securing funding from trusts, charities, the NHS, and employers for arts and humanities PhDs. These provide much needed additional streams of income which enable a healthy research environment; coupling such funding to a DTP may diminish the possible returns and may restrict the kinds of students that can be supported. Establishing targets may also increase competition for these kinds of funds, and may risk concentration of funding.

We are also concerned that targets may put undue pressure on external partners and may prove a barrier to initial engagement and expressions of interest amongst potential partners. 3rd sector bodies, in particular, cannot usually predict their funding package far in advance, and therefore will not be able to commit funding. It should be recognised that collaborative projects with HEIs tend to sit on the periphery of the external partners' activities and are rarely core; the benefits emerge over time, and so too may financial commitment. To ensure new and innovative projects are supported, there should not be an over-emphasis on securing financial commitments upfront when that is not appropriate.

A more transparent relationship with Innovate UK (through clearer defined funding opportunities, like KTPs outside the traditional STEM sector) would be helpful, provided that arts and humanities are not a closed area and can make material contribution to non-HE sectors (cultural studies would be the best example of such cross-disciplinarity). At present, Innovate UK and the Research Councils are not speaking the same language and this makes it difficult to seek match funding from non-HE sectors.

Survey Question 8: How should the allocation of studentships across high-quality proposals be decided? Are there other metrics which could help provide AHRC with a means of allocation between successful bids?

The current AHRC allocation model does not work well for smaller and specialist HEIs which may have pockets of research excellence but an emerging research environment, or for HEIs which have a broader widening participation mission and may therefore have a different, and perhaps a less traditional, PGR student profile.

We are also concerned by the tendency towards 'path dependency' in funding allocations - that institutions who have a track record in receiving funding previously are preferred over those that have not in future funding decisions. We do not believe this exists as such, but including consideration of prior funding success in allocations may disadvantage emerging research cultures and academics at the beginning of their research careers.

The current system denies many world leading academics the opportunity to secure a funded place for a PhD student. While we would not generally favour a transition to a more metric based system, but allocation on the basis of REF outcomes would be less inequitable than the current BGF system.

There is also a need to protect access for smaller, less fashionable, subjects, for example Religious Studies. And finally there is a need to recognise that 'novel approaches to problems can emerge more readily when carried out away from conventional centres of excellence, which can become too dominated by current fashions and research leaders' (Sir Paul Nurse, 2015. p.6); these will not be captured by metrics but by a nuanced understanding of what each partner is bringing to the DTP.

Survey Question 9: Are there any significant obstacles to the standard duration of funding being increased to 4 years, but with thesis submission required within the funded period of the studentship, rather than within a further 'writing up period'?

For traditional, writing-based PhDs this change will require some rewriting of regulations, but it should not be a significant obstacle. 4 years better reflects the real time taken for most arts and humanities PhDs and is a sensible move.

For practice-based PhDs and other non-traditional routes this shift could be problematic. We would welcome consideration of these alternative research models where flexibility and dynamism would be more relevant, and from which innovative projects can emerge.

With regard to widening participation in research, this shift may also prove a challenge for non-traditional students, such as mature students who have other commitments which may affect their available time unexpectedly.

For these students and PhD models the long-standing 'writing up period' represents an essential opportunity for assimilation, reflection, and synthesis of ideas. It may also provide an essential cushion for the dissemination of their practice, where the timetable is often out of the student's direct control (e.g. exhibiting work).

It would be in our view counter-productive to establish a rigid protocol which dissuaded excellent students and restricted innovation in arts and humanities research.

Survey Question 10: Do you agree that the 'Cohort Development Funding' (CDF) element of the awards be maintained?

Developing cohorts of research students together is a valuable activity. We feel the resulting activities of such funding would benefit from including PGRs from a wider range of HEIs and non-AHRC funded students; engagement with the wider UK research environment beyond the cohort is essential to maintain the relevancy of research training and their development as researchers.

Survey Question 11: Is the current level (additional 5% of the studentship funding allocation) appropriate?

It seems appropriate.

Any other comments

GuildHE and its research network CREST are extremely concerned at the proposal to withdraw open access to Collaborative Doctoral Awards, one of only two forms of AHRC studentship that is available outside of these long term collaborative models, and with which our members have had success. Moving these inside the DTPs is a mistake which we feel has significant if unintended consequences for institutions who use them as gateways to RCUK funding, to build relevant regional partnerships, and to recruit excellent research students in new and exciting fields.

The CDA at York St John University is a good example. The scheme has enabled a partnership with York Theatre Royal, one of many external partners with which YSJU has established strong relationships. These partners tend to be diverse in their nature and subject, and like many smaller institutions with pockets of research excellence, YSJU don't have a large scale intensity in one area. CDAs enable them and others to capitalise on this breadth and to deepen their expertise in those niche areas which are of utmost relevance to them as an institution and to the regional partners with which they work.

The removal of any element of open competition for AHRC studentships seems a retrograde step and will further concentrate funding, albeit a relatively small amount. It also erodes any distinctiveness between block grant partnerships and other kinds of awards.

In the supporting documentation for this consultation the AHRC states that 'it is not the intention of the next DTP scheme to further concentrate access to funding'. However there needs to be mechanisms built into the call and review process to ensure that this intention is realised, and those not currently involved in a DTP are not left out in the cold.

We would welcome criteria to stimulate the inclusion of a broad base of institutions in DTP applications, and the adoption of a principle that partnership groups from previous rounds may not apply in the same configuration again. Both of these mechanisms have been used effectively in the EU in the HERA (<http://heranet.info/>) funding calls to ensure the excellence and diversity of arts and humanities research in Europe, and could be usefully replicated here.