Context

1 Prior to the advent of fully costed research funding, HEFCE (and its predecessors) provided funding for research infrastructure as part of its grant to universities. This income was supplemented by income from successful research grant applications by staff to the funding councils and other external funding bodies. From 1986, following the introduction of the RAE (now the REF), the funding council’s research infrastructure funding started to become more selective (the so-called QR element).

2 From 2004, the volume of QR reduced with the advent of fully costed research, whereby the majority of research infrastructure funding now comes to us not from HEFCE but as part of the award of research grants and contracts in response to successful applications by our staff. The research time of our academic staff is therefore funded primarily by the research grants that they win, and only to a very modest extent by QR. Student fees and other non-research income to the University are directed to supporting those activities, and cannot reasonably be used to subsidise unfunded research activity.

Contract

3 Academic staff who are contracted to carry out research duties are required by their (written) conditions of employment to contribute to the “advancement and diffusion of knowledge through … advanced study and original research …” Written contracts can never, and are not expected to, provide exhaustive detail of the commitments entered into but to set them out in broad terms. The written, express terms of the contract are bolstered by:

- implied contractual terms, such as the duties to take reasonable care in the performance of duties, to work obediently and diligently, and to obey lawful, reasonable management instructions;

- non-contractual policies and procedures: these might include documents which set out the standards expected such as the current strategic framework, the Code of Practice for Research, promotion criteria, the Birmingham Academic, the College compact etc;

- local practice: this might include local or research area specific norms, for example in the expectation of grant income targets; and

- sector-wide standards, including the well established and normal working practice of obtaining external grant income to support one’s research effort.

4 For many years, for the large majority of academic staff, obtaining external research funding has been a pre-requisite of their being able to conduct research in the first place. Most disciplines are not resourced to carry out the research programmes proposed by individual members of academic staff and it is often only by obtaining external funding that it becomes possible to carry out the research and therefore meet the express contractual requirement to contribute to the “advancement and diffusion of knowledge through … advanced study and original research...”.

To varying degrees in different disciplines, programmes of research are often dependent on winning external funding. This is what we mean by ‘disciplinary necessity’. Without external funding the work cannot be carried out and the individual member of academic staff may therefore be unable to deliver on his/her contractual obligation to contribute to the “advancement and diffusion of knowledge through ... advanced study and original research... “

It is therefore common in most academic disciplines for academic staff to seek and obtain external research grant income. While not all academic staff will at any one time have external grant income, it is expected that the large majority of academic staff in the large majority of disciplines will be applying regularly for external research grant income, and that individual members of academic staff will win such funding according to the norms of their discipline.

Furthermore, success in obtaining external grant funding is in part a measure of the quality of the research thinking leading up to the formulation of the grant application; in other words, it is a measure of performance in itself. Universities in the UK have long been assessed on measures relating to research grant income and publication quality, and these measures apply equally to individual members of academic staff.

Support

Of course, the University is sensitive to disciplinary norms and adjusts its expectations accordingly. We have established systems to support staff in preparing and submitting high quality research grant applications such that they stand a good chance of being funded. We understand that not all applications will be funded and we are committed to working with staff whose applications are unfunded to help them to be successful next time.

We do not expect of staff that they will win grants that are not there to be won, or that they will win them in greater numbers than is the norm for their discipline across a range of comparable institutions in the UK, or that early career researchers will win them to the same extent that they are won by established researchers. We are also conscious of the range of duties other than research carried out by individual members of staff and adjust our expectations accordingly.

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