



## Universities Scotland's response to the Independent Review of Scottish Funding Council's (SFC) Research Pooling Initiative

January 2019

1. Universities Scotland is the representative organisation for the 19 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Scotland. We are pleased to contribute comments on the call for evidence for the Independent Review of the research pooling initiative.

### Strategic rationale

2. The pools initiative was initiated as a strategic intervention with the aim of strengthening Scotland's research base, drawing together excellence in disciplines to form and further develop capacity. This aim remains relevant. However, this review is timely. The strategic challenges and opportunities which we reflect upon briefly below, have changed in the time since the formation of the pools.

### Support for the pools amongst the sector

3. The pools initiative has received largely positive feedback from the sector on facilitating collaboration. The approach of phase 1 of the pooling programme to fund new equipment and enable appointments (both senior appointments and studentships) were important as infrastructure and people are, of course, critical to research. We have also received positive feedback that the research culture in Scotland is inclusive and that the impact of the pools spreads across the whole geography of Scotland. The funding model has changed in recent years and the review should closely consider whether the pools are sufficiently resourced to achieve their aims, particularly considering the evolving research environment.
4. We consider this approach to have been pioneering in the early 2000s when research pooling was initiated. The focus on critical mass and bringing together HEIs is important to maximise the benefits of a diverse sector and build academic networks to enable the exchange of knowledge and ideas. Although in the context of international collaboration, a recent report<sup>1</sup> noted that: "Research collaboration that is grown out of informal discussions and information sharing accounts for as much as half of all collaborations", therefore building, supporting and maintaining networks is important.

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<sup>1</sup> Elsevier, [International comparative Performance of the UK Research Base 2016](#), October 2017



## The future of the pools

5. We see this review as necessary and timely. The research environment is changing with a greater focus on collaboration and consortia addressing large challenges, requiring multi-disciplinary collaboration. We are seeing large investments in: industry-led research such as through the Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund; a focus on place and economic development in Strength in Places Fund; and, a focus on international development such as via the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) Intractable Challenges Hubs. This additional UK-wide investment requires new partnerships outside of academia to deliver impact (but it is important to note this impact is dependent on a healthy and flourishing research base).
6. This review should consider how pools should respond to this new context. An initial step could be to consider how to enhance collaboration between pools and other structures such as Innovation Centres to address challenges.
7. Further, challenge-focussed research will necessitate the greater involvement of a wider range of research disciplines including the social sciences. These subjects are not well covered across the current pools and this review seems timely to consider how to bring together researchers from different disciplinary background to tackle challenges.

## The challenges facing Scottish HEIs

8. It is important that the review of the pools fully acknowledges the wider context of research and innovation and is not exclusively considered through a Scottish lens. In this section, we will briefly touch on funding of international comparators, funding boosts in England and new structures in the rest of the UK.
9. A number of comparator nations (identified by the Sustainable Growth Commission, including Norway, Denmark and Netherlands) have increased their investment in the public funding of Higher Education between 2010 and 2016 (by 33%, 15% and 14%) with the equivalent figure for Scotland shows a 6% decline<sup>2</sup>.
10. The latest Scottish Government budget represented a 1.79% real terms cut to the SFC's resources budget and a 9% cash cut to capital. Audit Scotland found that from 2014-15 to 2016-17 total REG and RPG (SFC's research funding) fell by 7% in real terms. The most recent budget continues that trend of declining resources.
11. Research England (the equivalent of SFC's research and innovation function in England) has been awarded a 20% real terms increase in budget from 2015/16 to 2019/20 as part of the UK Industrial Strategy. We are seeing new investments such as Expanding Excellence in England and the International Investment Initiative to support research in English HEIs. More widely UK Government will spend an additional £2Bn per year on research and development by the end of this Parliament which represents a large additional investment that will be largely competitive across the UK.

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<sup>2</sup> European University Association, [EUA Public Funding Observatory 2017 Country Sheets](#), March 2018



12. In combination this demonstrates the real challenge to Scottish research in terms of the increasing investment internationally, and within the UK system, all within a highly competitive research environment. It is clear that the SFC's future research policy must be mindful of these pressures on the sector in Scotland: the challenge to sustainability; constraints on ambition; and the growth of UK and international competition. We see value in the review focussing on leverage of research and innovation funding (and other investment) into Scotland and see a role for SFC, and its partner agencies under the Enterprise and Skills Strategic Board, focussing closely on what each can do to support HEIs to secure this outcome. This should include an ambitious target under the Industrial Strategy.
13. The review should also consider changes across the UK – particularly thinking about new geographical groups and collaborations. While these groups have different objectives to the research pools (with a particularly focus on place-based economic opportunities) there are some similarities such as equipment sharing and identifying complementary areas of research to collaborate across institutions. Examples include the N8 (eight northern England research intensives collaborative structure) and GW4 (a partnership across Bath, Bristol, Cardiff and Exeter universities). At the time of initiation the pool programme was novel but we increasingly see more strategic collaborations in nations or regions of the UK which aim to drive up quality and competitiveness across the UK.
14. We see this review as important element of SFC's broader consideration of research policy and would welcome an assessment that factors in strong UK and global competition and is able to make ambitious recommendations.

#### The review process

15. We consider that the timing for responses is very tight – with just eight weeks that includes the Christmas period. This response provides headline comments and we look forward to engaging closely with the review over the coming months.

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Contact: Ruth Meyer, Senior Policy Officer (Research and Innovation),  
[ruth@universities-scotland.ac.uk](mailto:ruth@universities-scotland.ac.uk), 0131 225 0705

