

Research Fortnight

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Blue skies and small grants likely to be cut

Haldane principle at risk if funds channelled to state priorities

RESEARCH COUNCILS MAY have to reduce blue skies funding and rescind small grants in the wake of spending cuts, a senior research council official revealed in a candid lecture last month that is available online.

Rather than reduce individual budgets, research councils will be looking to protect some areas and cut others completely, Phil Sooben, director of policy and administration for the Economic and Social Research Council told the UK Research Conference in London on 23 September.

With less money it is more likely councils will allocate funding according to the grain of government policies, Sooben suggested. "It might be that we will have to take schemes that are currently open and steer them toward priority areas," he told the conference. Institutions would also be less free to decide the direction of council-funded PhDs, he added. But he insisted that there was "no secret list in terms of [which] institutions or research programmes have to go".

There was a question mark over whether councils could continue to provide small pockets of funding of less than £100,000, Sooben said, given evidence suggesting greater value from concentrating funding on a smaller number of large grants. Support for early career researchers and knowledge transfer was also being questioned.

Sooben said he could only talk definitively about ESRC but added that much of what he said applied across the board. He also said that research councils were expecting budget cuts in the region of 25 per cent.

Cuts of 33 per cent to council administration budgets would make reviewing applications more difficult, he added, which is likely to reduce success rates to 10 per cent. If this happened then the ESRC would have to change how it assesses grant applications to reduce demand. He highlighted the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council's controversial policy of temporarily preventing applications from people who have been repeatedly turned down in the past.

Meanwhile, in a leaked email to vice chancellors, Universities UK President Steve Smith revealed last week that UK research could lose £1 billion. Luke

by Elizabeth Gibney

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Georghiou, professor of science and technology policy at the University of Manchester, told *Research Fortnight* that this figure matched expectations.

However it is unclear where the cuts might come from within the £3bn research council budget and £1.6bn of quality-related funding, which goes direct to universities through the Higher Education Funding Council for England, he says. "[£1bn] corresponds to 15 per cent of the total, which is generally seen as the maximum you could bear without totally wrecking the system—the figure you can survive without real Eastern Europe-style damage," Georghiou says.

"If the whole thing is focused on QR that would be very damaging." Instead Georghiou expects cuts to QR to be confined to research rated as 2* in the Research Assessment Exercise, which would add up to about 7 per cent of the total.

Another area that could be targeted is the R&D tax credit, he adds. "We spend around £800m on the R&D tax credit and not all of that is efficient spending, you could have a much more targeted spending there," he says.

In July, the Royal Society told the government that a 20 per cent funding cut would be "irreversibly catastrophic", and a 10 per cent cut could "seriously jeopardise the productivity and stability" of UK science.

The Treasury will today announce overall budget allocations for the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. Outline research council budgets are not expected until mid-November. These are expected to be finalised in December, with the new regime to be implemented in April 2011.

At the time of going to press a spokesman for the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills said all figures are speculation. The government's comprehensive spending review is to be announced at 12.30pm today. Phil Sooben's lecture can be viewed at http://policyreview.tv/conf_media/448/free_videos.html

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