

HUBS Executive Committee Watching Briefs – July 2020

The HUBS Executive Committee have agreed that members of the committee would take on “Watching Briefs”. The aim of this initiative is to support Objective C2 in the HUBS Constitution:

“to enable input from the Heads and Subject Leads in the HE sector into policy formulation and responses for the Society and its Member Organisations”

The role of the brief holder is to:

- Take note of items of interest in the education policy update and science policy newsletter
- Subscribe to WonkHE, and keep up to date on developments
- Engage with relevant Royal Society of Biology staff member for their brief who will share relevant education policy updates, science policy newsletter and relevant consultation responses to inform the brief
- Consult with HUBS Executive Committee and wider HUBS members, if needed, to inform a HUBS viewpoint
- Engage with relevant consultation and inquiry responses, providing a HUBS view.

Consultation responses page for formal RSB positions and responses can be found at:

<https://www.rsb.org.uk/policy/consultations/consultation-responses>

HUBS members are encouraged to open dialogue directly with authors of briefs and copy all correspondence to consultation@rsb.org.uk

Briefs will be updated at regular intervals.

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Watching Brief – Office for Students and Teaching Excellence Framework

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OFS:

The pandemic has meant that all HEIs have had to adapt practices very rapidly with many for instance using take-home exams as replacements for normal proctored exams and instigating a range of variants of no detriment policies and marks safety nets. OfS has published a wide range of supporting guidance in a short space of time to try and support the rapid decisions that Universities have had to take. The publications over the last 4 months are too numerous to sensibly digest here so the reader is referred to OfS website [\[https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/\]](https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/) for more details, but examples from the regulator over the last month include:

- OfS bans controversial ‘conditional unconditional’ offers during pandemic
- Briefing note published on supporting disabled students during the pandemic
- OfS response to HESA graduate outcomes survey
- Supporting graduate employability during the pandemic
- Supporting student mental health through pandemic
- OfS guidance on student and consumer protection
- OfS briefing note on supporting international students during pandemic

In late June Sir Michael Barber announced that he will step down as chair of the Office for Students, in March 2021. It is uncertain as yet whether this will signal a change in direction or modus operandi of the regulator.

TEF

It was announced that no TEF5 in 2020 with the regulator giving consideration to 2021. It is still unclear how elements of the Pearce review [still to be published] will influence TEF going forward, and indeed the Pearce review itself is yet to be published. The timelines must be challenging as a new methodology is to be introduced for 2021!

There is a TEF Advisory Group, chaired by Chris Millward (Director of Fair Access and Participation), the remit being to advise OfS on the design and implementation of the future scheme.

<https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/teaching/future-of-the-tef/tef-advisory-group/>

A Metrics Peer Review Group will undertake expert peer review of the OfS's proposed statistical methods for the future TEF metrics. The group will also comment on the presentation and clarity of the new TEF metrics from a metrics user perspective.

<https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/teaching/future-of-the-tef/tef-metrics-peer-review-group/>

Watching Brief – Research Excellence Framework (REF)

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This brief summarises current information on two aspects of the REF, outputs and the Impact assessment.

All staff with a “significant responsibility for research” and being an independent researcher on the census date, currently of 31st July 2020 (see update below, this date unchanged owing to Covid pandemic response), are counted to calculate the total number of outputs to be submitted by a given institution to a given unit of assessment (UoA). A code of practice must be put in place by a given institution to identify which of its staff fall within or outside this category. This code of practice must be drafted, consulted upon and sent to the REF team by March 2019. It has been noted that there is potential for industrial action to delay this process, which will be more straight forward for some institutions over others, where it might pose a considerable burden.

The number of submitted outputs is defined as a minimum of 1 per staff member with a significant responsibility for research and a maximum of 5 with an average of 2.5 per FTE within the department. However, this can be reduced to 0 for an individual staff member if there has been a demonstrable impact of personal circumstances during the REF period that resulted in no REF returnable outputs being available for submission.

Outputs are not portable but if an eligible former member of staff generated an eligible output before they left the institution then this may be submitted in the pool of outputs for that institution. The REF guidance on outputs have added some flexibility to the open access requirements for a given output to be eligible for submission. This includes the ability of an institution to submit 5% of its outputs that do not comply with the open access restrictions. Outputs will be judged based on their rigour, significance and originality and given a score of 1* to 4*. Impact factors of journals will not be used but citation data may be used by the UoA. Main panel A has stated that pedagogical research should be submitted to UoA23 (Education) and not to UoAs 1-6 which fall under its remit. HUMBS members may wish to note that this guidance differs to that of the other main panels.

Impact now more important- to 25% of the REF weighting. Number of impact case studies also changes. Minimum of 2 case studies for up to 15FTE submitted then 1 additional case study per 15FTE up to 105FTE then 1 additional case study for every 50FTE submitted (so a submission of 300FTE will require 12 impact case studies).

For Impact- the initial decisions document from September 2017 states:

“A key recommendation of the Stern review was to ensure the REF could better capture the multiple and diverse pathways and mechanisms through which impact arises from a body of work, and through which real benefits to the UK and wider world are delivered. This aim was widely supported by respondents to the consultation, and the funding bodies will seek to implement this in the exercise. Impacts will also be rated as 1* to 4* and the criteria for impact are of ‘reach and significance’.

- **Impact arising from public engagement.** This has been made more explicitly approved as an impact in and of its own and not just as a demonstration of impact of a wider impact case study.

The **guidance on submitting impacts on teaching are widened** to include impacts **within**, as well as beyond, the submitting institution. Guidance on demonstrating evidence against the criteria for this type of impact have been submitted. Main panel A states its expectation that evidence for impact will include quantitative data. Main panel B explicitly makes mention of both qualitative as well as quantitative measures to demonstrate impact.

- a. Impacts will remain eligible for submission by the institution or institutions in which the associated research has been conducted.
- b. Impacts should be underpinned by excellent research, with ‘excellent’ research continuing to mean the quality of the research is at least equivalent to two star.
- c. The excellent research underpinning impact case studies must have been produced during the period from 1 January 2000 to 31 December 2020 across all UOAs. This will apply to all case studies, including examples continued or developed from REF 2014. The impacts described in case studies must have occurred within the period from 1 August 2013 to 31 July 2020”

Main panel A- which includes most UoAs of relevance to HUBS members have stated explicitly that pedagogical research should be submitted to UoA23 (Education) and not to their UoAs (1-6). This is a key difference to Main panel B (which includes Chemistry and Physics) where pedagogical research will be accepted to those sub-panels. However, impact case studies could include the results of pedagogical research where impact can be demonstrated, particularly in cases where practice has changed in the sector as a result of the research.

RSB via HUBS and HUCMBS made two representations to the REF directorate that the treatment of main panel A UoAs was iniquitous in relation to the submission of pedagogical research. Unfortunately, both representations were rejected on the grounds that the UoA subpanels did not have the necessary expertise to judge the quality of pedagogical research outputs and any such submissions would be cross referred to UoA23 (Education). Instead, it was suggested that submitting institutions could indicate their intention to submit pedagogical research to main panel A UoAs through a survey that closed in December 2019 in an attempt to influence the subpanel expertise composition. At the time of writing, it is not known whether the results of that survey of submission intentions has influenced the subpanel composition in main panel A.

As a result of the Spring 2020 SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, the REF2021 process was halted. A survey of stakeholders was conducted with a short deadline (5th May 2020) to ascertain the

level of delay that was deemed appropriate. The survey asked for opinions on revised submission dates for staff and outputs and also extensions to the impact assessment period. Many HEIs considered a blanket extension of at least 12 months to all aspects of the process to be most appropriate. As a result of the consultation, a short extension was approved. Submissions to REF 2021 will be midday, 31 March 2021. This deadline will apply for all elements of submissions. With this revised timetable, the results are now expected in April 2022. Additionally, the impact assessment period has been universally extended and case studies may therefore describe specific examples of impact achieved in the period 1 August 2013 to 31 December 2020. The staff census date of 31 July 2020 remains unchanged.

Watching Brief – The Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF)

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The Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) is a government proposal to monitor Knowledge Exchange activities within HEIs. It is an attempt to measure the third strand of HEIs' activities and will sit alongside REF and TEF. Ranking in the KEF will be linked to funding (HEIF in England and some other unspecified fund in the other nations). HEIF is planned to be £250 million in 2019/20.

In spite of the pandemic, KEF is going ahead, although the initial submissions, planned to be in March, are now postponed until autumn 2020. The deadline for institutional submissions for the KEF process has been put back to 16th October 2020 for HEIs currently in receipt of HEIF funding. No other changes have been made to the institutional clustering or to other aspects of the process. Although there is a clear link between participation in the KEF process and subsequent HEIF funding, the algorithm for this has not been defined.

UKRI have stated that the outcomes of KEF will be announced in December 2020 (<https://re.ukri.org/knowledge-exchange/knowledge-exchange-framework/>).

Watching Brief – Brexit

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As the UK approaches its exit from the European Union on 31 January 2021, little has been resolved in terms of future participation in EU Horizon Europe Framework programmes, involvement in the next phase of Erasmus+, or the scale and distribution of a UK replacement for EU Structural Funds. One not unexpected piece of clarity is that EU nationals will no longer be eligible for UK home fee status and student loans from 2021-22.

Horizon Europe

The UK government published its [strategy for negotiations with the EU](#) on its future wider relationship with the bloc on 27 February, stating that it will “consider a relationship in line with non-EU member state participation” with Horizon Europe, the EU’s incoming research programme. Although unstated publicly, indications are that the negotiating mandate is for full association to Horizon Europe. However, a Wellcome Trust report has stated “The most likely outcome at this point is that the UK misses the start of Horizon Europe due to delays in the Brexit process. Our analysis is that the best way to minimise disruption is by negotiating a standalone agreement as soon as possible, regardless of ongoing Brexit uncertainty elsewhere.” There was little indication that the negotiating process had moved forward significantly by the start of July 2020.

Erasmus+

Even greater uncertainty surrounds the UK’s future participation in Erasmus+. Officially the UK government is open to exploring participation in the successor scheme to the current Erasmus+ programme after the UK leaves the European Union. However, it is also considering a wide range of options with regards to the future of international exchange and collaboration in education and training, including a potential domestic alternative to the Erasmus+ programme.

The UK’s future involvement in Erasmus+, which [accounts for more than half](#) of all international mobility of UK students, has been [in doubt](#) ever since the UK voted to leave the EU. The UK has pledged to cover the funding of continued participation until the end of 2020 under the terms of its withdrawal agreement and has agreed to cover awards approved before exit day in the event of a no-deal Brexit.

There is concern at the lack of progress on a domestic alternative, in the event that the UK decides not to participate further, and about the lack of appreciation of the challenges involved in developing any alternative, including gaining the support of potential international partners.

EU Structural Funds

The third area of uncertainty relates to the replacement of EU Structural funds after Brexit. These funds have been directed to disadvantaged regions within the UK, particularly Wales and Northern Ireland, but also to poorer regions of Scotland and England. Designed inter alia to enhance capacity including in skills and research and development, structural funds have been a greater source of income to many universities than EU framework funding. Many questions remain about their replacement by the proposed UK Shared Prosperity Fund including its scale and timetable, the priorities associated with the fund, and the extent of its control by devolved and other regional administrations.

EU Students Studying in the UK

Decisions taken by the UK government and devolved administrations mean that students from the European Union will no longer be eligible for home fee status and student loans in the UK from the 2021-22 academic year. This will not apply to Irish nationals living in the UK and Ireland whose right to study and to access benefits and services will be preserved on a reciprocal basis for UK and Irish nationals under the Common Travel Area arrangement.

Nick Hillman, director of the Higher Education Policy Institute, has commented that “Higher fees and no more access to student loans could risk a decline of about 60 per cent in the number of EU students coming to the UK to study. If that happens, our universities will be less diverse and less open to influences from other countries.”

Relevant references

- <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20200709153826701>
- https://www.ria.ie/sites/default/files/2020-04-20_structural_funds_explainer_2.pdf
- <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8527/>
- <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/budget-2020-huge-promises-uk-research-devil-will-be-detail>
- <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/policy-experts-encouraged-uk-stance-horizon-europe>
- <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/uk-likely-miss-start-eus-horizon-europe-says-welcome>
- <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/uk-could-only-join-horizon-europe-transition-extension>
- <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/peers-extremely-concerned-over-lack-no-deal-planning-he>
- <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/uk-driving-forward-plan-post-brex-it-alternative-erasmus>
- <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/eu-students-lose-home-status-and-loan-access-england-2021>

Watching Brief – Degree Apprenticeships

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There are still relatively few Standards that are relevant to the Biosciences. The most relevant one continues to be the Laboratory Scientist (level 6), but there are several others at level 6 (Environmental Health Practitioner; Dietitian) and level 7 (Agriculture, Environmental & Animal Care; Bioinformatics Scientist; Health Scientist). Several Universities are offering degree apprenticeships based on the Lab Scientist Standard and these can cover chemical and health sciences as well as life sciences.

IfATE (Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education) has introduced special measures to deal with the Covid-19 situation and these will be retained into the new year. There will be flexibility for the delivery of end point assessments (EPA) until at least the start of 2021. <https://www.instituteforapprenticeships.org/eqaepa-guidance-during-covid-19/>

The concept and benefits of Degree Apprenticeships, and their value to individuals and employers, are being reviewed by IfATE, and UVAC (University Vocational Awards Council) are working closely with them to help to provide an evidence base. <https://uvac.ac.uk/ifate-review-of-degree-apprenticeships-integrated-degree-apprenticeships-degrees-in-apprenticeships-or-maybe-all-3/>

Further to this, IfATE are also consulting on the process for reviewing funding bands. The consultation has set out a proposed core model and is seeking views on two options for dealing with differences in costs of teaching and consumables. IfATE have published a report on the Cost of Delivering Apprenticeship Standards.

<https://www.instituteforapprenticeships.org/reviews-and-consultations/consultations/consultation-on-changes-to-funding-recommendation/>

IfATE is proposing to move away from a system whereby quality assurance is delivered by several different organisations and will instead be done by either Ofqual or, for integrated degree apprenticeships, the Office for Students (OfS).

<https://www.instituteforapprenticeships.org/reviews-and-consultations/consultations/eqa-consultation/>

Watching Brief – Inclusivity and widening participation

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COVID-19

The move to online delivery of teaching and assessment in response to the COVID-19 pandemic has had, and continues to have, multiple implications for disabled students and students from disadvantaged backgrounds. For some students, the move has been a positive one: a move away from traditional exam formats has reduced anxiety, and online delivery has been positive for some students who experience challenges accessing on-campus teaching. For many, however, the experience has been less positive with challenges that include exacerbation of mental health problems, lack of access to appropriate IT resources and difficult domestic environments which are not conducive to study.

Universities have responded to these issues, for example, by increasing online mental health support, providing IT loans, ensuring that the new assessments are designed to be inclusive and taking steps to ensure that recorded material is accessible to all. Outreach and widening participation events have also moved to online delivery. Implementation of these mitigations has been undertaken over a very short period of time and work will continue as universities plan for the 2020-21 academic year. Sharing good practice is key: The Office for Students has published a set of briefing notes which include examples of practical steps taken by HEIs to support students, including disabled students, students without family support and students with mental health difficulties.

<https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/coronavirus/briefing-notes/>

Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) students may face a disproportionate impact compared to other students, potentially adding to the existing attainment gap.

<https://wonkhe.com/blogs/covid-19-does-discriminate-so-we-should-tackle-its-impact-on-bame-students/>

Graduate Outcomes

Publication of the first “experimental release” of the Graduate Outcomes survey in June 2020 highlighted some stark inequalities in graduate prospects. The survey gathered data on graduates’ work status 15 months after graduation and was completed by 360,000 responders who graduated in 2017-18. Of particular note:

- BAME graduates were more likely to be unemployed, or in part-time employment, compared to white graduates. For black graduates, 51% were in full-time employment, compared to 62% of white graduates.
- Overall, male graduates were paid 10% more than female graduates.
- A lower proportion of graduates with a known disability go on to full-time employment than those with no known disability.

- UK domiciled graduates from full-time undergraduate courses were more likely to be in further study if they had attended a privately funded school than if they had attended a state-funded school or college.
- Among graduates domiciled from England, Wales and Northern Ireland, those from low participation neighbourhoods were less likely to go into full-time employment and more likely to go into part-time employment than those from other participation neighbourhoods.

<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/gender-and-ethnicity-graduate-gap-outlined-new-uk-data>

<https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/18-06-2020/sb257-higher-education-graduate-outcomes-statistics>

Disabled Students Commission

The Disabled Students Commission (DSC) was formed in March 2020. The DSC, chaired by Professor Geoff Layer (Vice-Chancellor of Wolverhampton University), has been established to advise, inform and influence higher education providers to improve support for disabled students. AdvanceHE will have oversight of the DSC and responsibility for dissemination of research and other DSC outcomes.

<https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/guidance/equality-diversity-and-inclusion/creating-inclusive-environment/disabled-people/disabled-students-commission>

Evaluation of Widening Participation activities

Higher education providers have invested increasing levels of resource into activities which aim to inspire and support students from under-represented groups to access higher education. A report published in January 2020 by the Education Policy Institute (EPI) and Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes (TASO) reviewed the evidence of the impact of these outreach interventions. The report presents 92 studies that provide empirical evidence of impact; it finds that many activities have a positive impact on students' understanding of and attitude to higher education and yet there is a lack of evidence that this translates through to increased enrolment from underrepresented groups.

<https://taso.org.uk/news-item/report-evidence-widening-access-to-higher-education/>

https://taso.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Widening_participation-review_EPI-TASO_2020.pdf

The Office for Students also published a study (Feb 2020) on the impact of their financial support evaluation toolkit. Use of the toolkit highlighted the positive impact of bursaries in supporting recipients to achieve the same outcomes as their more advantaged peers.

<https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/evaluation-and-effective-practice/financial-support-evaluation-toolkit/>

Watching Brief – Scotland and Curriculum for Excellence

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Coronavirus: Scottish schools aim to reopen full-time in August (BBC News)

Scottish schools are aiming to reopen full-time with no physical distancing in August if coronavirus continues to be suppressed, John Swinney has said. Schools had been preparing to return with a "blended" model of face-to-face teaching and at-home learning. But the education secretary said "significant progress" had been made in controlling the spread of the virus. Mr Swinney said ministers were now preparing for all schools to open full-time in August. He had previously targeted having pupils spend at least half their time physically in the classroom, leading to concerns from parents. Opposition parties said the move was a "U-turn" and a "climbdown" which had been forced by public pressure. And union bosses said other measures would need to be put in place to keep staff and pupils safe, such as the use of face coverings and routine testing of teachers.

University of Glasgow awarded £38m grant for medical lab (BBC News)

The University of Glasgow has been awarded a £38m grant to create a lab that brings "cutting edge science" to a clinical setting. Researchers at the lab will work on tailoring medical treatments to patients, helping treat people more quickly and minimising side effects. The "Living Lab" will be at the university's premises next to the Queen Elizabeth University Hospital. The grant was announced by UK Business Minister Alok Sharma. Money for the project is being provided through UK Research and Innovation's Strength in Places fund. The university said the lab would be an "internationally leading project focused on translating cutting-edge science and innovation into a real-world clinical setting". It will be led by the same University of Glasgow team who set up a "rapid response" Covid-19 testing facility in the city. More than a dozen public and private partners are involved in the project. Alongside the £38m from the Strength in Places funding, the Living Lab will be supported by more than £22m from industrial partners and an investment of £27.5m through the Glasgow City Region City Deal and Glasgow City Council.

Scottish universities see rise in international applicants (BBC News)

The number of people from countries outside Europe who have applied for a place at a Scottish university has gone up despite the coronavirus pandemic. The 16% rise is revealed in figures from the university admissions service UCAS. But universities say they will not know for several weeks just how many people will actually take up their places. Some universities are fearful a drop in the number of international students will badly hit their finances. Students from countries outside Europe and the UK pay uncapped tuition fees of up to £30,000 a year. The overall number of applicants to Scottish universities is up 3% on

this point last year while the number of Scots who want a place is virtually identical. The number of applicants from EU countries, including the Republic of Ireland, is down 2%. Universities Scotland says this data is encouraging but sounded a cautious note. It will be September before its known how many of those who're offered a place take it up. Alastair Sim, Director of Universities Scotland: said: "The pandemic has cast huge uncertainty over university admissions for entry this year so these data are encouraging, particularly the double-digit rise in international applicants to Scotland's universities. "However, it will be September before universities know for sure whether offer-holders intend to take up their place. "Not all international students apply through UCAS, so we can't yet be sure if the positive trend shown in UCAS' data for overseas applicants will be borne out across all international applicants." The figures also suggest the number of Scots from the most disadvantaged postcode areas who are applying is holding steady. By 2030, a fifth of students at all Scottish universities will have to come from so-called SIMD20 areas. Mr Sim said: "Since the pandemic hit, universities have consistently said that they will not let it deter them from efforts to widen access and that they will offer more flexibility to applicants because of the major disruption to schools, to exams and to people's lives in general. "Today's data suggests that there's been no negative impact, so far, on applicants from the most deprived 20 per cent of Scotland's areas wanting to go to university - applicant numbers have held steady.

Scottish students face an end to free university education. (The Times, 13th June 2020)

Collapse in the number coming from overseas could lead to a £500m black hole and the return of tuition fees for Scots. Free university tuition for Scottish students may have to end as a result of the financial crisis gripping the sector, a leading educationalist has warned. Universities in Scotland face a £500m black hole, with the number of lucrative fee-paying students from overseas expected to fall steeply following the Covid-19 pandemic. The financial position could become even worse as a result of UK government plans to limit the number of fee-paying English students allowed to study in Scotland. An analysis of cash reserves and revenues, including money drawn from overseas students, found that about a third of Scotland's 19 higher-education institutions could have insufficient funding to continue by the end of the year.

Coronavirus: Scottish students to receive financial support early. (BBC News)

Colleges and universities will be able to offer funding to students facing hardship over the summer sooner than planned, Nicola Sturgeon has said. The Scottish government has brought forward £11.4m of discretionary funding to help students in difficulty. The funding, aimed at those unable to claim benefits while still studying, was not expected to be released until the start of the new academic year. The move was welcomed by the National Union of Students. Colleges will also be able to offer discretionary funds to bridge the gap between bursary payments and Universal Credit payments starting.

Coronavirus in Scotland: Edinburgh University warns of job cuts. (The Times 6th July, 2020)

Edinburgh University staff have been warned to prepare for redundancies and pay freezes to balance the books after the Covid-19 crisis. Peter Mathieson, the university principal, said its operations had been "substantially impacted" over the past four months. The university

executive approved a package this month put out for consultation with campus trade unions, including the suspension of job promotions, a likely pay freeze, and consideration of a voluntary severance scheme. Professor Mathieson said: "We are aiming to protect as many jobs as possible and will only contemplate compulsory redundancies as a last resort." However, he added: "We consider it prudent to plan for the worst."

£75 million boost for Scottish university research (Scottish Government press release)

The Scottish Government has announced a one-off £75 million increase in funding for Scotland's universities to ensure they can protect their world-leading research programmes against the financial impact of COVID-19. The significant intervention will help secure the jobs and training needed to support ongoing and future research work, meaning institutions can concentrate fully on planning the long-term future of a sector so vital to the Scottish economy. Universities will also be expected to adapt and use their own resources, as well as the packages of support for businesses provided by the UK Government, to counter the effects of the pandemic on research operations. The new funding will replace lost research income, protect research jobs, and help universities focus more effort on the high priority research needed to fight the outbreak and to support society and the economy, post COVID-19.