

UKRI Research Impacts Survey Results

Summary: A survey undertaken by UKRI indicates that universities are not holding back on plans to recruit new staff or PhD students in the wake of the pandemic but do have concerns about the impact of increased workloads on staff. There are also concerns about whether staff who have lost research time during the pandemic will be able to return to previous levels of research activity. University research leaders also foresee a risk of a shift in their research portfolios away from the arts and humanities and towards STEM.

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For funding organisations such as UKRI, it is tempting to think that researchers who apply for funding, and research funders who grant it, shape the future of university research.

The truth is more complicated. Universities spend a lot more on research than they receive in grants and fees from external funders. In order to support the current scale of research activities, Universities dig deep into surpluses on non-research activity, notably from commercial activity and from teaching overseas students. In 2019/20, their contribution was £4.5 billion, meeting 30% of their total cost of research.

Critically, universities want their researchers to explore their own ideas, and they want to carry out unfunded or partially funded research which address the great questions of the age. They want to engage with the needs and ambitions of their stakeholders but do not want to limit themselves to undertaking research which is dictated by external funders. They also want to pursue the international reputation which only successful impactful research brings. It is for these reasons they are willing to contribute to the costs of research where, as with most external funders, a grant or contract pays rather less than the full cost.

Inevitably this model requires a substantial investment from the university: the money required to support research equates to 15% of all non-research income. Therefore, universities have to be able to generate [large surpluses on other activities](#) and devote (as they currently do) the majority of those surpluses to research.

If universities were unable or unwilling to provide this level of support, UK research would look very different. Increases in costs on other activity or increases in the cost of research would inevitably lead to decisions about cutting research activity which may not be well aligned with the aims of external funders. Universities' successes in generating income with surpluses and their subsequent decisions in deploying those surpluses, are critical.

A year into the pandemic, we wanted to capture how it feels to be advocating for research in a university. Existing data capture the impact of decisions taken some time ago based on what was known at the time. We wanted an insight into the possible impact of decisions which are now being contemplated, with the new information universities have and in anticipation of future developments.

We did not want to institute a burdensome data collection exercise. So we devised a short survey of sentiment. The idea was to ask a series of questions, asking for impressions rather than data, which would take no more than 15 to 20 minutes for a university's senior research lead (typically a pro-vice-chancellor) to complete.

The survey was sent to the senior research contact at all higher education institutions funded for research by Research England, the Scottish Funding Council, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales and the Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland. We received 78 responses from 77 institutions.

Shifting priorities

There were strong indications of greater strategic direction of research activity within universities and colleges. More than half our respondents agreed that their institutions had become more selective in allocating research time and facilities to researchers; a majority also reported that departments, schools and faculties were being asked to do more to justify their resources for research.

Similarly, there were indications of significant shifts in subject mix: 61% of those whose research portfolios include medicine, health and life sciences expected those subjects' share of the institution's research activity to increase by 2023 with only 2% expecting a decline. Expectations of growth in other STEM subjects were almost as strong. By contrast, 41% of respondents expected arts and humanities' share of their institutions' research activity to decline, with only 7% expecting it to increase.

The shift towards STEM was particularly striking in the context of what our respondents expected to happen to funding from charities. Nearly three-quarters (73%) expected the value of new awards from charities to be lower over the next three years than previously. This would disproportionately affect medical research.

Either universities are anticipating a compensating shift towards medical research from public funders, or they are prepared to increase their investment in medical and health research in the face of reduced opportunities, perhaps in anticipation of better times to come or in a judgement about the societal importance of medical research.

Recruitment

We tested whether the appetite for recruiting staff and research students had been affected by events since the beginning of 2020.

TRAC ([Transparent Approach to Costing](#)) data suggest universities have to make a more substantial contribution of funds from their own resources to the cost of supporting postgraduate research students (PGRs) than to other research costs. On average, less than half the costs are recovered.

In spite of this, 96% reported either an increased or unchanged appetite to include studentships on grant applications and 75% were at least as keen as before to recruit self-funding students where the limited student fee almost certainly leaves much of the cost with the university. Attitudes towards offering fee waivers to students without funding were more evenly split.

Sentiment towards staff recruitment seems to be almost as robust. Only 12% agreed that events since the outbreak of the pandemic had made them less willing to recruit staff to first lecturing posts (66% disagreed). Figures for experienced staff were similar (15% versus 65%). We also asked whether institutions were recruiting staff on terms which envisaged them doing less research than those recruited in the past. Only 8% agreed.

Recruitment is a strong indicator of strategic confidence. These figures suggest that the financial impact of the pandemic has not yet forced universities to plan for a future in which they do less research even if it has forced many of their staff to prioritise other activities.

Impact on staff

The strong sentiment in favour of continued recruitment contrasts with a high level of concern about the conditions facing existing staff. Almost all respondents (97%) agreed that non-research workloads of academic staff have increased; 95% agreed that staff are finding it harder to make time for research. Our respondents clearly believe this is having an impact on research productivity: 93% felt that research activity in their institutions was more constrained by other pressures on staff time than in January 2020.

Strikingly, under half (47%) were confident that they would be able to support staff to return to former levels of research activity by the end of academic year 2021/22 (most of the remainder were unsure). This suggests a significant risk of long-term scarring of academic careers as a result of the pandemic. Our survey did not investigate which staff were likely to be affected but institutions will need to be aware of the risk this poses to under-represented groups.

These findings indicate the need for a broader understanding of the conditions which make university research possible. Traditionally, funders and regulators have focused on financial sustainability, asking questions about research deficits and how they are financed. But a mismatch between activity and resources can play out in other ways – for example through pressures on staff and infrastructure.

Data tables

1a) Compared to January 2020, my institution is being more selective in allocating time and resources for research to researchers and research groups.

	Overall
Strongly agree	8
Agree	36
Neither agree nor disagree	11
Disagree	15
Strongly disagree	5
Does not apply	

Strongly agree	11%
Agree	48%
Neither agree nor disagree	15%
Disagree	20%
Strongly disagree	7%
Does not apply	0%

1b) Compared to January 2020, my institution is asking (or will soon ask) departments, faculties and schools to do more to justify the resources they devote to research.

	Overall
Strongly agree	6
Agree	34
Neither agree nor disagree	12
Disagree	14
Strongly disagree	9
Does not apply	

Strongly agree	8%
Agree	45%
Neither agree nor disagree	16%
Disagree	19%
Strongly disagree	12%
Does not apply	0%

1c) Compared to January 2020, as a result of financial pressures, researchers in my institution have to pass (or will soon have to pass) more stringent approval processes and controls before they apply for research grants.

	Overall
Strongly agree	5
Agree	13
Neither agree nor disagree	16
Disagree	27
Strongly disagree	13
Does not apply	1

Strongly agree	7%
Agree	17%
Neither agree nor disagree	21%
Disagree	36%
Strongly disagree	17%
Does not apply	1%

2a) Compared to January 2020, researchers in my institution are finding it harder to make time for research, even when we would like them to do so.

	Overall
Strongly agree	33
Agree	38
Neither agree nor disagree	2
Disagree	2
Strongly disagree	
Does not apply	

Strongly agree	44%
Agree	51%
Neither agree nor disagree	3%
Disagree	3%
Strongly disagree	0%
Does not apply	0%

2b) Compared to January 2020, the non-research workloads of academic staff have increased.

	Overall
Strongly agree	47
Agree	26
Neither agree nor disagree	1
Disagree	1
Strongly disagree	
Does not apply	

Strongly agree	63%
Agree	35%
Neither agree nor disagree	1%
Disagree	1%
Strongly disagree	0%
Does not apply	0%

2c) Compared to January 2020, research in my institution is more constrained by other pressures on staff time, including other work pressures and pressures outside work.

	Overall
Strongly agree	35
Agree	35
Neither agree nor disagree	4
Disagree	1
Strongly disagree	
Does not apply	

Strongly agree	47%
Agree	47%
Neither agree nor disagree	5%
Disagree	1%
Strongly disagree	0%
Does not apply	0%

2d) Where research active academics have sacrificed research time to support other activities since January 2020, I am confident that the university will be able to support them in resuming their former levels of research activity by the end of Academic Year 2021-22.

	Overall
Strongly agree	3
Agree	32
Neither agree nor disagree	26
Disagree	12
Strongly disagree	2
Does not apply	

Strongly agree	4%
Agree	43%
Neither agree nor disagree	35%
Disagree	16%
Strongly disagree	3%
Does not apply	0%

3a) Compared to what we would have predicted in January 2020, we expect the value of new awards from UKRI research grants and other project grants from government funders over the next three years (2021-22, 2022-23 & 2023-24) to be:

	Overall
Much higher	
Higher	21
About the same	26
Lower	23
Much lower	2
Does not apply	2

Much higher	0%
Higher	28%
About the same	35%
Lower	31%
Much lower	3%
Does not apply	3%

3b) Compared to what we would have predicted in January 2020, we expect the value of new awards from charities over the next three years (2021-22, 2022-23 and 2023-24) to be:

	Overall
Much higher	
Higher	8
About the same	12
Lower	42
Much lower	13
Does not apply	

Much higher	0%
Higher	11%
About the same	16%
Lower	56%
Much lower	17%
Does not apply	0%

3c) Compared to what we would have predicted in January 2020, we expect the value of new awards for collaborative and commissioned research from business over the next three years (2021-22, 2022-23 and 2023-24) to be:

	Overall
Much higher	1
Higher	18
About the same	30
Lower	22
Much lower	4
Does not apply	

Much higher	1%
Higher	24%
About the same	40%
Lower	29%
Much lower	5%
Does not apply	0%

3d) Compared to what we would have predicted in January 2020, we expect our block grant funding for research (Research Excellence Grant in Scotland, QR in other countries) in 2022-23 and 2023-24 to be

	Overall
Much higher	
Higher	11
About the same	49
Lower	11
Much lower	
Does not apply	4

Much higher	0%
Higher	15%
About the same	65%
Lower	15%
Much lower	0%
Does not apply	5%

4a) When you discuss the ability of your university to finance its plans for research, which of the following do you and your colleagues see as having the greatest potential impact? Please rank in order. (NB. A 1-7 ranking scale was used with 1 being the top score, so a lower score means a higher average ranking)

	Pension costs	Int'l student income	Pressure on staff time from teaching	Home tuition fees	QR	Project funds (amounts available)	Project funds (market share)
All mean (67 cases)	4.4	3.7	3.4	3.7	4.1	4.0	4.7

5a) Since January 2020, the planned maintenance, renewal and improvement of facilities used primarily for research has been affected by other urgent estate-related priorities, such as making the facilities covid-secure. (NB. Agreement to this statement does not imply that you disagree with the priorities of your institution – only that you have noticed the effect on research infrastructure.)

	Overall
Strongly agree	9
Agree	28
Neither agree nor disagree	25
Disagree	8
Strongly disagree	3
Does not apply	1

Strongly agree	12%
Agree	38%
Neither agree nor disagree	34%
Disagree	11%
Strongly disagree	4%
Does not apply	1%

5b) Since January 2020, we have been able to bring forward the upgrading or refurbishment of facilities used primarily for research, taking advantage of a prolonged period of downtime.

	Overall
Strongly agree	1
Agree	6
Neither agree nor disagree	24
Disagree	33
Strongly disagree	9
Does not apply	1

Strongly agree	1%
Agree	8%
Neither agree nor disagree	32%
Disagree	45%
Strongly disagree	12%
Does not apply	1%

6a) Compared to January 2020, the ambition of my institution to include research studentships in research grant applications is:

	Overall
Much higher	8
Higher	20
About the same	41
Lower	1
Much lower	2
Does not apply	2

Much higher	11%
Higher	27%
About the same	55%
Lower	1%
Much lower	3%
Does not apply	3%

6c) Compared to January 2020, the ambition of my institution to recruit self-funded doctoral students is:

	Overall
Much higher	6
Higher	27
About the same	38
Lower	3
Much lower	
Does not apply	

Much higher	8%
Higher	36%
About the same	51%
Lower	4%
Much lower	0%
Does not apply	0%

6b) Compared to January 2020, the ambition of my institution to provide fee waivers for doctoral students without third-party support is:

	Overall
Much higher	3
Higher	12
About the same	40
Lower	13
Much lower	5
Does not apply	1

Much higher	4%
Higher	16%
About the same	54%
Lower	18%
Much lower	7%
Does not apply	1%

6d) As a consequence of events since January 2020 my institution is now less willing to recruit staff to their first lecturing posts.

	Overall
Strongly agree	2
Agree	7
Neither agree nor disagree	16
Disagree	34
Strongly disagree	15
Does not apply	

Strongly agree	3%
Agree	9%
Neither agree nor disagree	22%
Disagree	46%
Strongly disagree	20%
Does not apply	0%

6e) As a consequence of events since January 2020 my institution is now less willing to recruit experienced academic staff.

	Overall
Strongly agree	3
Agree	8
Neither agree nor disagree	15
Disagree	35
Strongly disagree	13
Does not apply	1

Strongly agree	4%
Agree	11%
Neither agree nor disagree	20%
Disagree	47%
Strongly disagree	17%
Does not apply	1%

6f) Events since January 2020 have made my institution consider recruiting academic staff on terms that anticipate them doing less research than people hired to similar roles in the past.

	Overall
Strongly agree	1
Agree	5
Neither agree nor disagree	19
Disagree	28
Strongly disagree	21
Does not apply	

Strongly agree	1%
Agree	7%
Neither agree nor disagree	26%
Disagree	38%
Strongly disagree	28%
Does not apply	0%

7a) By 2023, I would expect medicine health and life sciences (REF main panel A) to account for:

	Overall
A much higher proportion of my institution's research activity than in 2020	
A higher proportion	38
About the same proportion	23
A lower proportion	1
A much lower proportion	
Does not apply	12

A much higher proportion of my institution's research activity than in 2020	0%
A higher proportion	51%
About the same proportion	31%
A lower proportion	1%
A much lower proportion	0%
Does not apply	16%

7b) By 2023, I would expect physical sciences, engineering and mathematics (REF main panel B) to account for:

	Overall
A much higher proportion of my institution's research activity than in 2020	2
A higher proportion	26
About the same proportion	24
A lower proportion	4
A much lower proportion	
Does not apply	18

A much higher proportion of my institution's research activity than in 2020	3%
A higher proportion	35%
About the same proportion	32%
A lower proportion	5%
A much lower proportion	0%
Does not apply	24%

7c) By 2023, I would expect social sciences (REF main panel C) to account for:

	Overall
A much higher proportion of my institution's research activity than in 2020	2
A higher proportion	16
About the same proportion	33
A lower proportion	13
A much lower proportion	1
Does not apply	8

A much higher proportion of my institution's research activity than in 2020	3%
A higher proportion	22%
About the same proportion	45%
A lower proportion	18%
A much lower proportion	1%
Does not apply	11%

7d) By 2023, I would expect arts and humanities (REF main panel D) to account for:

	Overall
A much higher proportion of my institution's research activity than in 2020	2
A higher proportion	3
About the same proportion	36
A lower proportion	26
A much lower proportion	2
Does not apply	5

A much higher proportion of my institution's research activity than in 2020	3%
A higher proportion	4%
About the same proportion	49%
A lower proportion	35%
A much lower proportion	3%
Does not apply	7%