



RAND EUROPE

Evaluation of the Future Leaders Fellowship scheme

Process evaluation report

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Executive summary

The Future Leaders Fellowships (FLF) scheme occupies a unique position within the landscape of early-career researcher schemes in the UK, supporting both UK and international researchers working in a wide range of disciplines and sectors, and encouraging novel and interdisciplinary research projects.

In June 2022, UKRI commissioned RAND Europe to conduct an evaluation of the FLF scheme with the aim of understanding the impact of FLF, drawing lessons regarding how scheme implementation has enabled impact, and exploring the scheme's value for money. Following on from the evaluation framework report completed in November 2022, this process evaluation sought to understand the extent to which FLF's organisational targets have been achieved, to assess whether scheme management, support and structures have been fit for purpose, and to develop an understanding of barriers and facilitators faced by the scheme in relation to its set-up and implementation. Using a bespoke combination of analytical approaches consisting of comparator analysis, case studies and process mapping, this evaluation draws from data collected from key informant interviews (fellows, hosts, UKRI scheme management, unsuccessful applicants), FLF management information analysis and document review, to respond to six key evaluation questions around the uniqueness of the scheme, support for diversity and multidisciplinary and post-award support.

Our overall conclusion is that the FLF scheme is in good health and has been delivered well and to the satisfaction of applicants, fellows and host organisations, filling a unique position in the UK research and innovation (R&I) landscape. Notably, UKRI has acted to improve the scheme round after round, whether that be to better engage business applicants or enact positive action to improve inclusivity. The following paragraphs briefly touch upon these benefits as well as the challenges the FLF has faced.

Uniqueness of the scheme

While existing alongside a number of other early career fellowship schemes, such as the Leverhulme and British Academy schemes, FLF occupies a unique position within the R&I landscape. There was a strongly positive assessment of the uniqueness of the FLF scheme, particularly due to its open and inclusive eligibility criteria, its stable and long-term funding profile and its post-award support, compared to other UK and international schemes. The clear message from fellows was that the most beneficial unique aspect of FLF was its openness to a broad range of applicants due to its flexible and inclusive eligibility requirements. More broadly, fellows found the FLF scheme to be comparably better than other schemes they had knowledge or experience of.

Support of diversity and multidisciplinary

The FLF scheme seeks to support the diversity and multidisciplinary of fellows. This has been evidenced across the scheme's call processes, eligibility criteria and application and review processes, as well as in the measures put in place for host organisations to manage the demand for the scheme. More generally, support for diversity and multidisciplinary has also been seen in the FLF's *positive action on equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI)* with the majority of fellows reporting satisfaction with the EDI characteristics of their interview panel members. Findings on the extent of support for diversity and multidisciplinary in the FLF's *call processes* have shown that while the UKRI's approaches to business engagement are continuing to adapt and evolve, the academic focus of call guidelines is still a cause of concern to potential and current business fellows. Finally, while the FLF's multidisciplinary approach is seen as a key unique draw to the scheme, the language of the scheme is still perceived by some fellows as being primarily STEM-focused.

Regarding the extent of support for diversity and multidisciplinary in the FLF's *eligibility criteria and application processes*, the most notable finding is that the application process was most challenging to business applicants without an academic background or links to academia. However, the FLF scheme's application processes are evolving, becoming more flexible and adaptive to business applicants with each round. The evidence on supporting applicants across disciplines is predominantly positive, with the scheme being perceived as lending itself to unconventional research due to its flexibility.

UKRI has put considerable thought into supporting diversity and multidisciplinary in the FLF's *review process*. Supporting applicants across disciplines during the review process has met with FLF applicant approval, with panellists described as having appropriate subject-matter expertise, and the review process is felt to be fair and open to different research approaches. A final process where diversity and multidisciplinary is a key consideration is that of *demand management*. The UKRI has placed a requirement for host institutions to manage the increasingly large number of applicants to the FLF scheme; however, the measures and approaches taken by hosts and the experiences of fellows based on these measures have been variable and inconsistent.

Post-award

A crucial aspect of the FLF scheme achieving its overall objectives is the post-award stage. Here, we have considered the extent to which post-award management processes have supported the professional development of fellows through examining the scheme's post-award monitoring processes, the activities of the *FLF Development Network*, and the role of and impact of host institutions. Evidence on *post-award support and monitoring* has revealed how the FLF scheme's post-award due diligence processes for business/industry fellows were largely developed by drawing from Innovate UK's experience and expertise. In general, monitoring and reporting mechanisms were not viewed as onerous; however, there is mixed evidence on the appropriateness and clarity of Researchfish and there are questions around transparency on the use of monitoring data. Overall, fellows have found UKRI post-award support to be helpful and supportive, largely due to the dedicated UKRI post-award team. The FLF Development Network, including the Leadership Retreat and the Mentorship Programme, have been lauded for fostering cooperation, connecting with leading experts, broadening networks, and the development of new skills. There is potential, though, for improvement in

post-award processes in terms of more opportunities for academic-business engagement and engagement with media and policymakers, and increasing the appropriateness of offerings for humanities and business fellows respectively. Another key area where more strategic thought is needed is *host institution support and impact*. This is because of evidence highlighting that the level of support and overall experience of fellows with host institutions has been mixed and variable for both business and academic fellows.

Enablers and barriers

Evidence for what was felt to be working more/less well regarding the delivery of the FLF as well as various observed enablers/facilitators and barriers/obstacles revealed how the key enablers and facilitators of the successful implementation of the FLF scheme have been the long-term and flexible nature of the support and the certainty this provides; the open approach to funding research (and researchers) that other fellowship schemes do not necessarily fund; the spectrum of post-award support delivered through the Development Network; and the scheme's ability to learn and adapt over time. However, the scheme has also faced barriers and challenges to its successful implementation, including related to host institutions and business fellows, and challenges stemming from the Covid-19 pandemic. More general barriers affecting the successful implementation of the FLF scheme have to do with its continued academic leaning, the limited exposure and visibility of fellows and the restrictions on what FLF funding can be used for.

Recommendations

Given these findings, we propose the following set of recommendations to UKRI for consideration in future rounds and similar schemes:

- **Continue to operate a flexible and open scheme with an ongoing focus on EDI** (the highest cited benefits of the scheme by both fellows and hosts alike).
- **Have a more local and regional focus to FLF call processes** in order to increase the diversity and quality of future FLF cohorts.
- **Build on the successes of the demand management processes put in place at UKRI level** and encourage best practices in managing applicant numbers at institutional level.
- **Continue to engage and support business applicants**, advertising with and leveraging networks associated with other UKRI funds and business associations.
- **Continue to monitor and develop ways to support business fellows and applicants**, particularly in relation to post-award development and support.

The next step for this evaluation will be an impact assessment of the FLF, to be reported on in 2024.

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Abbreviations

ABPI	Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry
AHRC	Arts and Humanities Research Council
AHSS	Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
BEIS	Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy
BBSRC	Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council
CCA	Cause-Consequence Analysis
CBI	Confederation of British Industry
CMO	Context-Mechanism-Outcome
DESNZ	Department for Energy Security and Net Zero
EDI	Equality, Diversity and Inclusion
EQ	Evaluation Question
EPSRC	Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
FLF	Future Leaders Fellowships
FTE	Full-Time Equivalent
GIAA	Government Internal Audit Agency
Je-S	Joint Electronic Submission System
L&D	Learning and Development
MRC	Medical Research Council
NERC	Natural Environment Research Council
QED	Quasi-Experimental Design
RAEng	Royal Academy of Engineering
RAG	Red-Amber-Green
RC	Research Council
R&D	Research and Development
R&I	Research and Innovation
SMEs	Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
STFC	Science and Technology Facilities Council
ToC	Theory of Change
UKRI	UK Research and Innovation

1. Introduction

UKRI commissioned RAND Europe to conduct an evaluation of the Future Leaders Fellowship (FLF) scheme, with the aim of understanding the impact of FLF, of drawing lessons regarding how scheme implementation has enabled impact and of exploring the scheme's value for money. Following on from the evaluation framework report completed in November 2022, this process evaluation sought to understand the extent to which FLF's organisational targets have been achieved, assess whether scheme management, support and structures have been fit for purpose, and develop an understanding of the barriers and facilitators faced by the scheme in relation to its set-up and implementation. This introductory chapter provides a brief overview of the FLF scheme, as well as the process evaluation aims, scope and framework, its limitations and caveats, and finally an outline of the structure of the report.

1.1. Overview of the FLF scheme

Development and retention of research talent is key to the delivery of a wide range of UK government strategies and commitments. The FLF scheme represents a key investment for the delivery of the UK's researcher development goals. Announced in 2018, FLF is a £900 million fund that seeks to support the careers of world-class researchers across UK business and academia. The specific aims and objectives of the FLF are to:

- Promote high-quality and impactful research and innovation in areas aligned with the Government's Industrial Strategy.
- Increase engagement between industry and academia on research and innovation activities, including through collaboration and problem-solving, and facilitating the movement of people between sectors.
- Increase multi- and interdisciplinary research and innovation.
- Develop, retain, attract and sustain highly skilled research and innovation leaders of the future, from within the UK and from overseas.
- Develop a more equal, diverse and inclusive research and innovation workforce, which welcomes international talent.
- Provide sustained funding and resources for the best early career researchers and innovators to tackle difficult and novel challenges and deliver value for money.¹

¹ UKRI Future Leaders Fellowships – Overview of the Scheme, 2020.

FLF occupies a unique position within the broader landscape of early-career researcher and innovator schemes in the UK. Most schemes focus on specific disciplinary or subject area domains; FLF, by contrast, is a pan-UKRI scheme supporting fellows working in a wide range of disciplines and sectors. The topics pursued by fellows range across all UKRI council domains, facilitating multi- and interdisciplinary projects. Another important element of the FLF scheme is its flexibility, recognising that fellows come from different backgrounds and career stages, and may be part-time working or job sharing. Networking and collaboration across disciplines and sectors is also promoted to encourage novel and interdisciplinary projects. Moreover, the FLF scheme emphasises long-term support to researchers with the aim of facilitating the transition of talented individuals into positions of leadership and independence. Fellows are able to work on their ambitious projects and advance their careers over the course of 4 years with the option to extend the fellowship for an additional 3 years. There is also scope for fellows to request additional funding where appropriate and the cost of projects does not affect the success of the applications.

In addition to what is provided by UKRI, significant support from the organisations where the fellows will be based (host organisations) is required. For example, in the case of academic-hosted fellows, this entails an open-ended, UK-based independent research and/or innovation position for fellows to take up during the fellowship or as soon as it is completed. Depending on each fellow's situation (such as being business or overseas based), they have individual terms and conditions imposed on them related to the grant. In general, the FLF fellowship covers the salary of fellows and named staff (including pay rises not tied to performance), travelling, equipment and training costs. Fellows also have some flexibility to use the budget they costed in their original application to cover any changes they have to make, according to the UKRI virement policy. After six rounds of grant-giving, 499 fellows had been funded by FLF with the amount given ranging from £245,000 to £2.524 million.² As of 2023, eight rounds had been launched.³ With 40 per cent of awards going to non-UK nationals,⁴ FLF is also helping attract global talent to the UK in ways not done through traditional fellowship schemes.

1.2. Process evaluation aims and scope

This process evaluation seeks to understand the extent to which FLF's organisational targets have been achieved, to assess whether scheme management, support and structures have been fit for purpose, and to develop an understanding of the barriers and facilitators faced by the scheme in relation to its set-up and implementation, thereby identifying opportunities for learning. It also seeks to assess the extent to which the FLF has been designed and implemented in a way that supports its anticipated impacts. The process evaluation covers rounds 1–6 of the FLF scheme. Its scope is restricted to the set-up, operational delivery and implementation of the scheme, rather than the processes through which impacts have been achieved. The latter will be explored further as part of the impact evaluation, in which we will adopt, amongst other methods, a Context-Mechanism-Outcome (CMO) analytical framing to

² FLF Portfolio data. RAND analysis.

³ What Are Future Leaders Fellowships.

⁴ RAND Europe, RAND Analysis of Management Information Data.

allow for a better understanding of linkages between processes, and a Cause-Consequence Analysis (CCA) to assess if processes are likely to impede or facilitate impact.

With these aims and scope in mind, this process evaluation report highlights findings and evidence related to the following evaluation questions (EQs):

- **Evaluation question 1:** To what extent is the premise of the FLF scheme unique in the sector?
- **Evaluation question 2:** To what extent and how have FLF processes supported diversity and multidisciplinary in the fellowship scheme?
- **Evaluation question 3:** To what extent has FLF delivered effective post-award management to support the professional development of the fellows?
- **Evaluation question 4:** What, in practice, is felt to be working more/less well regarding the delivery of the FLF?
- **Evaluation question 5:** What are the unexpected barriers or facilitators to FLF processes and the delivery of the anticipated outcomes, if any?
- **Evaluation question 6:** What lessons are there for future rounds/similar schemes?

These EQs and associated evaluation metrics were arrived at in consultation with UKRI, through an iterative process involving an assessment of the validity of the original evaluation questions in the Request for Proposals after a review of documents relevant to the FLF scheme including the Government Internal Audit Agency (GIAA) UKRI FLF Audit, the (then) BEIS Critical Friend review of the FLF and FLF quarterly reports from Q2–Q4 2019–20, Q1–Q4 2020–21 and Q1–Q4 2021–22. The EQs were further selected for their alignment to process themes identified by the evaluation team derived from inputs, activities and outputs within the FLF Theory of Change (ToC) as detailed in the evaluation framework report prepared by RAND Europe in November 2022.⁵

1.3. Process evaluation framework

As detailed in RAND Europe's FLF evaluation framework, the process evaluation uses a theory-based mixed-methods approach guided primarily by the evaluation questions derived from the FLF ToC, with an adapted Kirkpatrick model (a framework traditionally used for evaluating training interventions) used as an additional lens for data collection and analysis.⁵ The process evaluation involved three analytical approaches – process mapping, case studies and comparator analysis – and used three data collection methods – document review, management information analysis and key informant interviews. The following sections discuss each of these in turn.

1.3.1. Process evaluation analytical approaches

The analytical approaches used in this evaluation were selected to build a 'living' picture of FLF processes, including examples of scheme processes in action, thereby helping to comprehensively answer the evaluation questions. These approaches were:

⁵ RAND Europe, FLF Evaluation Framework.

a) Process mapping

We synthesised the data collected to create an ‘end to end’ process map of the FLF scheme. Through review of 25 documents supplied by UKRI, analysis of FLF grant data and supplementary online searches, we mapped out the various established operations and support processes that exist within the FLF funding activities, dividing FLF scheme processes into a set of stages – from scheme design, funding calls, application, review and decision making to post-award and monitoring and evaluation. This exercise ensured we have a full step-by-step understanding (and visualisation) of the funding processes of UKRI’s FLF, upon which assessment of the processes can be carried out.

b) Case studies

Case studies are intended to be used to answer EQ4: *What, in practice, is felt to be working more/less well regarding the delivery of the FLF?* The three case studies included in this report – Positive Action on EDI; the FLF Development Network Mentorship Programme; and Demand Management – were purposively selected in consultation with the UKRI, to tease out instances in which processes have worked exceptionally well to illustrate best practice, and where they have not, to provoke some thought on opportunities for improvement.

c) Comparator analysis

We conducted a high-level analysis of comparator schemes in order to answer EQ1: *To what extent is the premise of the FLF scheme unique in the sector?* The comparator analysis was also aimed at exemplifying best practice from other relevant fellowship schemes, linking these practices to areas where FLF processes have faced challenges, or where potential improvements have been identified. The comparator cases were identified through the key informant interviews detailed below, supplemented by a targeted review of the literature, focusing on any systematic analyses.

1.3.2. Process evaluation data collection methods

The process evaluation relied on three data sources: document review, management information analysis and key informant interviews. These data collection methods are described in more detail below:

a) Document review

Documents deemed relevant and significant to informing the process evaluation framework questions were identified in consultation with the UKRI. These were a) the Government Internal Audit Agency (GIAA) UKRI FLF Audit, which aimed to assess the effectiveness of the organisation, structure and processes in place to ensure that the high-level aims of the scheme are met and that risks are managed; b) the BEIS Critical Friend review of the FLF, which provided a snapshot review of the FLF reflecting the conclusions of an independent Assurance Review Team; c) BEIS FLF quarterly reports – 11 reports reviewed from Q2–Q4 2019–20, Q1–Q4 2020–21 and Q1–Q4 2021–22, based on RAG (Red-Amber-Green) ratings covering finance, people, milestones and benefits metrics. In addition, we conducted a further review of scheme documentation to develop our understanding of FLF processes. Documents reviewed include scheme call documentation; review panel documentation; proposal assessment criteria; documents relating to FLF marketing, communications and events (e.g.

the FLF Conference); the FLF Business case; FLF project board minutes; and documents related to the FLF Development Network.

b) Management information analysis

A review of management information such as call documentation, FLF bi-monthly reports, fellowship baseline reports and grant management data, was conducted to provide an overview of existing data, identifying gaps for primary data collection. It also aided in answering EQ4: *What, in practice, is felt to be working more/less well regarding the delivery of the FLF?*, by facilitating consideration of the extent to which FLF's organisational targets for applicants, awardees and funding provision have been achieved.

c) Key informant interviews

Alongside document review and management information analysis, data on how the scheme set-up and delivery has been received by hosts, fellows and key stakeholders, and on barriers and enablers to scheme implementation, has been collected primarily through key informant interviews. To inform the process evaluation we conducted interviews with the following groups (see Annex B for full list):

- Nine scheme-level interviews (including two case-study related interviews), including FLF scheme managers.
- 24 FLF fellows.
- Nine members of staff at host institutions of FLF fellows.
- Six unsuccessful applicants to FLF (includes highest scoring unsuccessful applicants at the interview stage and those who were offered FLF but declined in favour of other funds).

FLF fellow and host institution interviewees were selected using a stratified, purposive sampling approach. For each FLF cohort, we stratified fellows by criteria such as Research Council, sector (business/academia), subject area, gender and grant size (using ranges). Four fellows from each funding round were then selected purposively to ensure a mix of interviewees against the stratification criteria (both within each cohort and across the sample of fellows as a whole). From the 24 sampled fellows, host institutions were selected for interviews with institutional personnel. The institutions were also selected to ensure a mix of institution types, both in terms of sector (business/academia) and size. To complement our interviews with FLF beneficiaries (fellows and hosts), we also conducted six interviews with unsuccessful applicants, with the aim of understanding their perceptions regarding the application process. Interview topic guides and analysis coding was guided by the evaluation questions.

Interviews were preferred over surveys as a data collection method for this stage of the evaluation based on several factors. The evaluation questions mapped to the ToC themes of value and implementation (as detailed in Annex A) included metrics such as *perceptions of barriers and enablers* and *assessment of factors that hindered/facilitated programme targets* that would not be best captured through the standardised format of survey questionnaires. Instead, questions calling for individual perceptions and lived experience required a more interactive form of data collection offered through online, one-to-one interaction between interviewees and the research team, supporting a more exploratory research approach that

allowed for tailored explanatory comments and the prompting of additional clarification questions. However, while interviews were the preferred data collection method for the process evaluation of the FLF, surveys (career tracker and host institution surveys) will be conducted as part of the impact evaluation of the scheme. Here, the evaluation team has established that instead of focusing on the individual fellow as the unit of analysis, the wider, aggregate impacts of the scheme will be examined through interviews, focus groups and/or surveys, as feasible and appropriate.

1.4. Limitations and caveats

Firstly, exogenous shocks, such as Covid-19, have had uneven impacts on FLF cohorts and disciplines, presenting challenges to fair evaluation. Earlier cohorts may have been particularly disadvantaged by the pandemic and related restrictions, impacting their perceptions of FLF processes including, for example, the time it took receive feedback on the outcome of their application at the pre-award stage.

Secondly, while our approach aims to be comprehensive and proportional in terms of interviewee sample size and composition, given the small sample size of business and Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (AHSS) awardees a nuanced assessment of FLF processes for those categories of fellows has been taken, with findings extrapolated in relation to the entire cohort where appropriate.

Finally, given that the process evaluation covered rounds 1 to 6 of an ongoing scheme, whose processes and procedures continue to evolve, the observations and recommendations stemming from an evaluation are likely to vary in relevance and applicability as the scheme progresses. Ideally, the evaluation would include follow up and assessment of the fellows and unsuccessful applicants to track the longer-term impacts of the scheme. What we are proposing is a step in this direction, setting out a range of indicators that can be used to assess whether the scheme is on track to achieve longer-term desired outcomes and impacts. Additionally, the evaluation has been designed in a way to ensure it is repeatable and that longer-term impacts can be captured in full at a later date using the same methods and framework.

1.5. Structure of the report

This report first outlines how the FLF scheme works, describing its processes and how it has changed over time. It then presents findings broadly split by what has worked well and not so well, and ends with conclusions and recommendations. The EQs are answered throughout these sections (see Table 1) as well as directly in Chapter 5.

Table 1: Evaluation questions and corresponding report sections

Evaluation question	Report section
1: To what extent is the premise of the FLF scheme unique in the sector?	3.1 Uniqueness of the FLF scheme
2: To what extent and how have FLF processes supported diversity and multidisciplinary in the fellowship scheme?	3.2 Support of EDI
3: To what extent has FLF delivered effective post-award management to support the professional development of the fellows?	3.3 Post-award support from UKRI to fellows
4: What, in practice, is felt to be working more/less well regarding the delivery of the FLF?	3. Evaluation of the scheme's successes (what worked well)

Evaluation of the Future Leaders Fellowships scheme

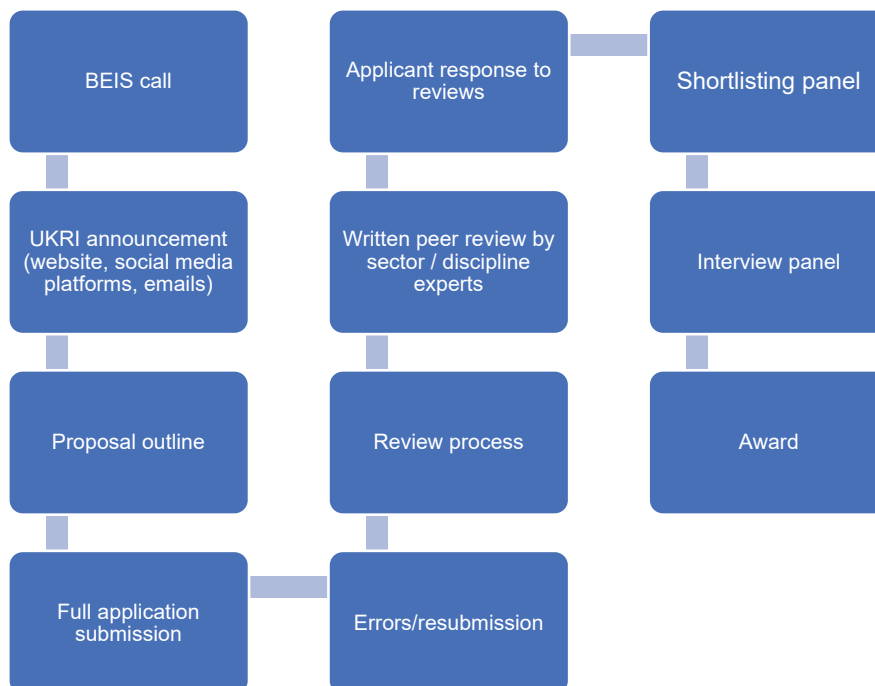
Evaluation question	Report section
5: What are the unexpected barriers or facilitators to FLF processes and the delivery of the anticipated outcomes, if any?	4. Evaluation of the scheme's challenges (what can be improved upon)
6: What lessons are there for future rounds/similar schemes?	6. Recommendations

2. Overview of the FLF scheme

This chapter summarises the FLF’s pre- and post-award processes, analysis of which is given in the following chapters. The information presented here is largely based upon the official call documentation, as well as additional information provided via interviews with UKRI scheme managers.

The overall pre-award process outlined in Figure 1 reflects the typical steps taken by UKRI to launch, invite applications, assess and award FLFs. Each step is described fully in the sections below.

Figure 1: Call and application process (simplified)

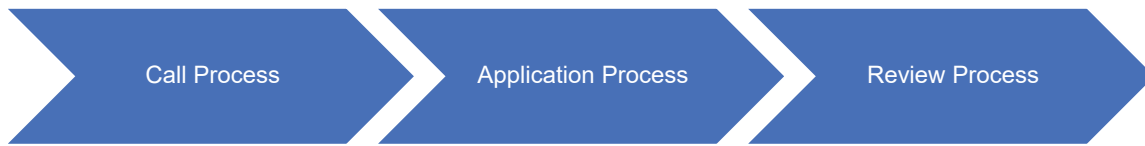


Source: RAND analysis of FLF documentation.

2.1. FLF pre-award processes

We have split the FLF’s pre-award processes into three simple stages: call, application and review (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Overview of FLF pre-award processes



2.1.1. Call and application processes

- **Announcement**

Firstly, each call for proposals is announced by BEIS (now the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology [DSIT]) and then a UKRI announcement follows. The call is promoted through the UKRI website,⁶ social media platforms and via email. UKRI also utilises established mailing lists for communicating funding opportunities to research organisations. In round 4 (2019), for example, the UKRI communications plan involved a press release, a ‘Meet our Fellows’ webpage which introduced the fellows, and a tweet from @ukri_news using #UKRIFLF, while host organisations could also promote relevant press releases.⁷ After round 1 (2018), a newsletter was also introduced. Pre-COVID-19, UKRI held town hall meetings in different UK regions to market the scheme. Webinars for applicants and employees at host research offices were in use by round 7 (2022).⁸ Also in round 7, YouTube and Global Talent Campaign videos, as well as case studies focusing on the fellowship’s aims, were published.⁹

⁶ Future Leaders Fellowships – Round Eight, 2023.

⁷ FLF Award Announcement – RACI and timeline.

⁸ Int_27_Programme-level.

⁹ UKRI Future Leaders Fellowships – Case Study Brief 2022.

Figure 3: Timelines for round 6 (2020)¹⁰



Source: Future Leaders Fellowships: Round 6 – UKRI. As of 8 February 2024:

<https://www.ukri.org/opportunity/future-leaders-fellowships-round-6/>

There is typically a window of three months from the announcement of the call to full application submission.¹¹ In round 3 (2019/20), calls for proposals were more clearly promoted to business-hosted applicants for the first time, though they were always able to apply, resulting in awards to a small cohort of business fellows.

Initially there was some experimentation in marketing the call to determine how the scheme would support both academic and business fellows. For academic applicants, the application process was familiar, involving: long timelines, using the Joint Electronic Submission System (Je-S), and the provisions of documentation such as a proposal form, CV and outputs list, workplan, case for support, head of department supporting statement, proposal cover letter and mentor statement. For business applicants these aspects to the process were less familiar, and in addition their way of costing was an awkward fit with the usual accounting required for a proposal.¹² Business fellows' feedback was subsequently used to understand their challenges (e.g. not being used to the Je-S platform, and the need for an Innovate UK-style approach to applications). Those who had previous Innovate UK grants tended to better understand the application process. Thus, UKRI retrofitted elements that worked for business

¹⁰ Future Leaders Fellowships – Round Six.

¹¹ Future Leaders Fellowships – Round Seven.

¹² Int_27_Programme-level.

applications into an existing set-up designed to fund early career academic research. This was largely done by changing the language, introducing separate sections in the documentation for business applicants to reach their target audience in business, and running separate business briefings. Additional communications such as workshops, webinars and one-to-one sessions were offered to business applicants to support their applications. After the initial rounds, this led to the attraction of more business applicants.¹³

Applicants have access to information about application and selection processes, the assessment criteria and FAQs before they apply.

- **Guidance to research organisations – demand management**

Research organisations are encouraged by UKRI to internally select a small number of high-quality applications to apply to the scheme in order to manage demand and improve the quality of applications. UKRI guidelines encourage host organisations to ensure that the process of selecting these applicants aligns with best practice and promotes fairness, transparency and diversity.¹⁴ Even though there was no limit in rounds 1–6 on the number of outline proposals coming from the same host organisation, they had to ‘commit to the long-term potential of all fellows’.¹⁵ UKRI now imposes a cap on applications from organisations in current and future rounds to further manage demand.

- **Outline proposal**

Applicants in rounds 1–7 submitted an outline proposal to express their interest in FLF, with a timeline of around 5–6 weeks from call to submission.¹⁶ For example, in round 7 (2022), the outline proposal opening date was 6 September 2022 and the closing date was 18 October 2022. The purpose of the outline proposal was to help UKRI estimate the number of applicants and prepare assessment panels accordingly.¹⁷ Applicants submitted the outline proposal via the Je-S system.¹⁸

At the outline stage, the information required included the project details (host organisation, department, grant reference, project title), information about the fellows and their co-investigators, project partners, objectives, RX/Innovate UK Relevance, and a summary of the project (4,000 characters including spaces). Cover letters were required justifying applications that: require funding over £1.5m, require an individual piece of equipment over £138,000, will conduct instrument development, involve business-hosted fellows applying for a reduced hours fellowship, or involve fellowships to be conducted on a job-share basis.

A different process for the outline stage for business fellows was used, with a simpler online form instead of the Je-S system.¹⁹ After assessing the applicants interested in the scheme, UKRI staff engage reactively in individual conversations to help applicants assess scheme fit.

¹³ Int_26_Programme-level.

¹⁴ Letter to Those Submitting 6 or More Eols, n.d.

¹⁵ UKRI Future Leaders Fellowships – Round 6 Guidance for Applicants.

¹⁶ UKRI FLF Core Slide Set.

¹⁷ UKRI Future Leaders Fellowships – Round 6 Guidance for Applicants.

¹⁸ UKRI FLF Core Slide Set, n.d.

¹⁹ Int_26_Programme-level.

They answered questions and set up calls with not only the interested applicant but also often with host organisation support colleagues.²⁰

Following the submission of the outline proposal, UKRI sent letters to academic host organisations to confirm the number of outline proposals submitted. Business hosts were also contacted to provide additional guidance on the use of the application systems and on the preparation of the applications.²¹ UKRI did not provide feedback at this stage.²² Subsequently, for round 8 (2023), the requirement to submit an outline proposal was removed.²³

- **Full application**

Those invited to submit a full application had around 11–12 weeks from when the Je-S system opened to the final deadline. We note that the outline and full application timelines overlap. For example, in round 7 (2022) the outline proposal window opened on 6 September 2022 and closed on 18 October 2022, while full applications opened on 13 September 2022 and closed on 6 December 2022. As such, applicants had around 7–8 weeks to submit their full application.

Initially, the application process was not considered optimal for business applicants, who were not familiar with academic review practices. Part of this was understanding that it would take least 6–9 months from submitting the application to being awarded, during which much can change within the business itself and its environment (e.g. personnel change, changing market conditions leading to protected budget for FLF being needed elsewhere), potentially affecting their ability to take on the fellowship.²⁴

At the full application stage, the documents required are: proposal form, case for support, justification for resources, host organisation statement, letters of support (project partner, mentor statement and others actively involved in grant), CV and outputs list, workplan and forms (e.g. signed animal usage declaration). This amounts to around 29 pages of written content.²⁵

Full applications need to be submitted to UKRI via the Je-S system by 16:00 on the deadline date. As mentioned, the host organisations must demonstrate their commitment to supporting the fellow in their letter of support. For example, in the case of academic-hosted fellows, this entails an open-ended UK-based independent research and/or innovation position, for the fellow to take up during the fellowship or as soon as it is completed.

- **Errors/resubmission**

Certain errors may result in the return of an application for amendment. For example, it is important that the project duration aligns with the proposed Full Time Equivalent (FTE) even if the applicant is applying for a part-time fellowship or for a reduced hours basis fellowship (only for business hosted fellows). All the documents required at the full proposal stage must be uploaded. It would also be considered an error if the roles of the Project Partners and Collaborators are unclear. A collaborator is someone with whom the fellow may be working with and has a direct involvement to the project. On the other hand, the Project Partner is

²⁰ Int_26_Programme-level.

²¹ UKRI FLF Core Slide Set, n.d.

²² UKRI Future Leaders Fellowships – Round 6 Guidance for Applicants, 2020.

²³ Future Leaders Fellowships – Round Eight.

²⁴ Int_26_Programme-level.

²⁵ UKRI Future Leaders Fellowships – Round 6 Guidance for Applicants, 2020

defined as a collaborating organisation which has an integral role in the suggested research and/or innovation. This may be through in-kind or cash contributions, and includes expertise, staff time or use of facilities.²⁶

2.1.2. Application criteria

Fellows and host organisations must meet multiple criteria to be considered eligible for the fellowship. Applicants (academic) can be returning to research or innovation from a career break or from working in a different role. Fellowships can also be held on a part-time basis, allowing fellows to balance different responsibilities that they may have. However, it is anticipated that fellows will be committed full time to activities related to the fellowship from the start of the award. Business-hosted fellows are allowed, if necessary for their career, to dedicate up to 40 per cent of their time on non-fellowship activities on a Reduced Hours Fellowship. Applicants can also hold a FLF award on a job-share basis. UKRI supports applications from those who aim to combine the fellowship with personal responsibilities. Reasons why this may fit for some potential fellows include timeliness or maintaining an existing job-share. However, applicants need to justify why the proposed programme of research and/or innovation would not be facilitated better by two part-time fellowships.²⁷

As for competency-related criteria, FLF applicants are required to have deep knowledge of the R&I area and have a compelling case for the significance of their project. Projects must have a wide and increasing impact in their field while benefiting from the long-term and flexible support of FLF, and should involve novel research and pursue ambitious goals. The applicant should also be able to demonstrate leadership skills. Business-hosted applicants must secure the support of the business that hosts them, while academic-hosted applicants need to have secured the support of their institution, which may entail their commitment to an open-ended position at the end of the fellowship. Applicants are required to be able to develop collaborations and networks nationally, internationally or across disciplines.

In addition to the above, applicants must also be able to demonstrate:

- Experience and potential:
 - Applicants need to demonstrate the required level of skills, knowledge and experience to work on the proposed project.
 - Strong track record of difficult research/innovative projects in their area of expertise.
 - Capable of adapting to opportunity and changing direction in projects.
- Personal development:
 - Have mapped opportunities for their career development as leaders in their field such as having international cooperation.
 - Have identified opportunities for further professional development support such as training courses and having a programme of skills development.
- Skills:
 - Excellent communication and interpersonal skills in order to engage with different audiences.

²⁶ UKRI Future Leaders Fellowships – Frequently Asked Questions, 2020.

²⁷ UKRI Future Leaders Fellowships – Applying for a Fellowship on Job-Share Basis.

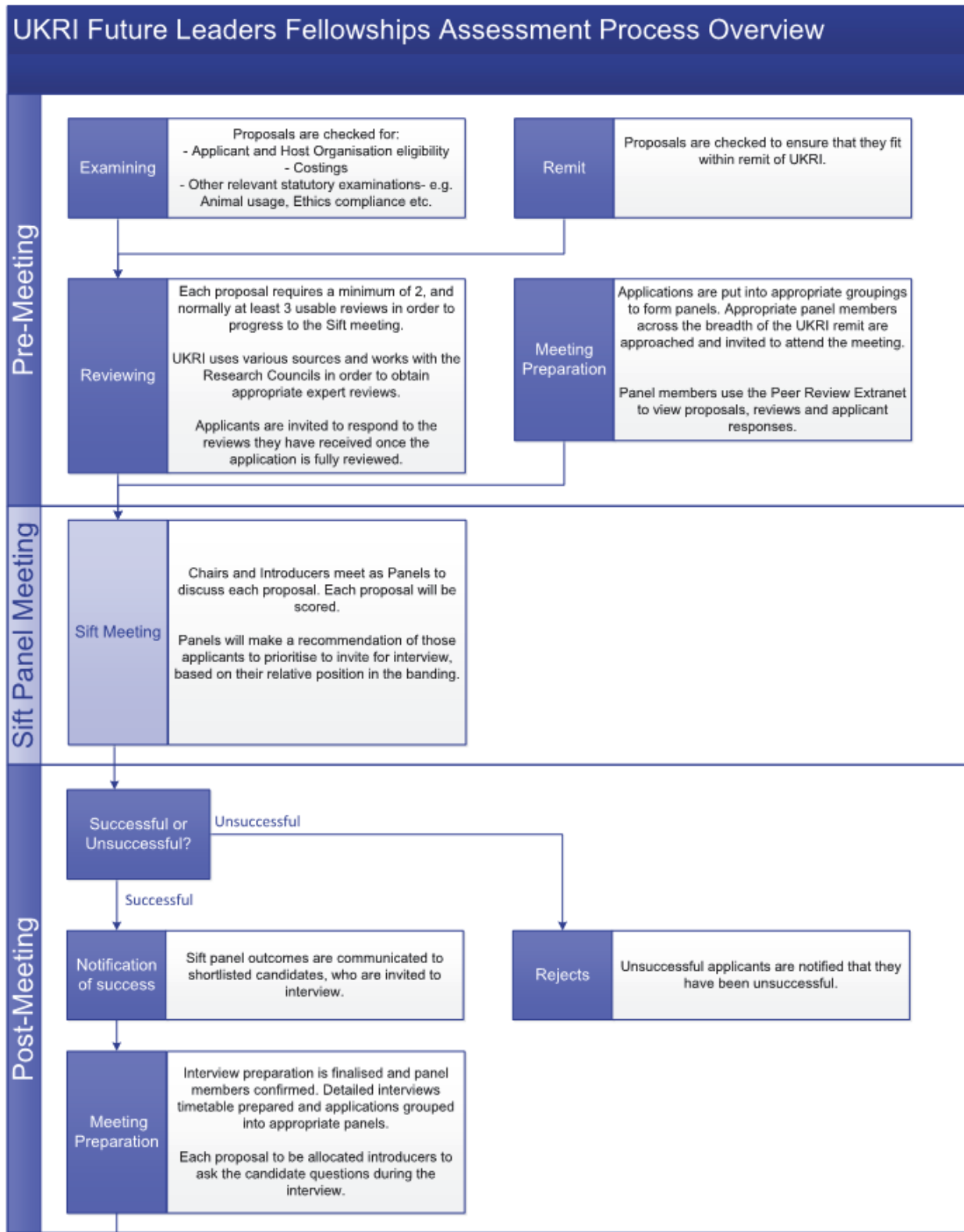
- Being able to explain how the outcomes of their project will be promoted and communicated.²⁸

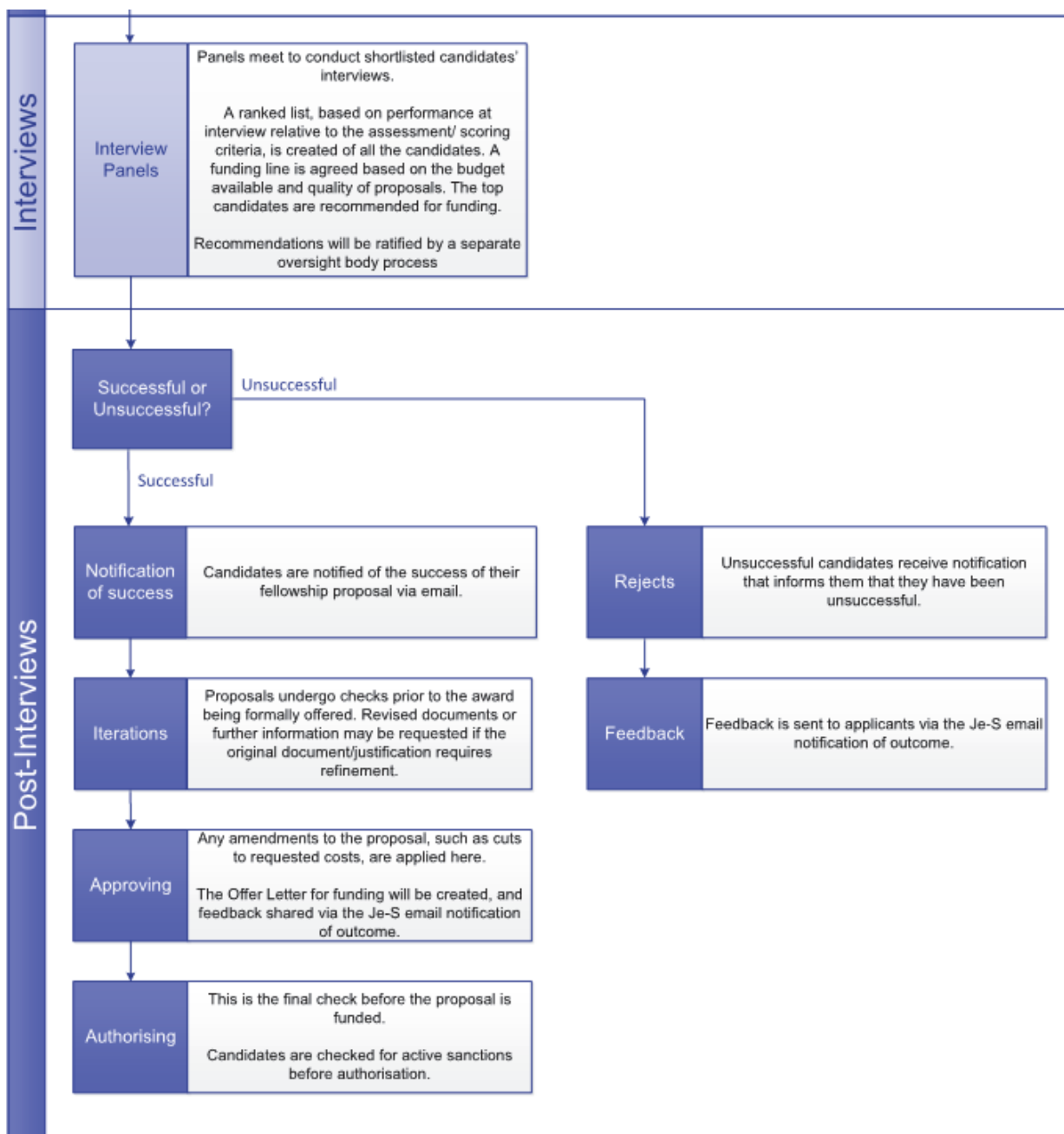
2.1.3. Review process

This section offers an analysis of the FLF's review processes starting with a mapping of the processes and a discussion of the extent to which these have supported business applicants and diverse applications. This is followed by an analysis of how demand management processes and EDI considerations have been managed, and finally an examination of the extent to which review processes have supported ethnic diversity.

²⁸ UKRI Future Leaders Fellowships – Individual Eligibility and Person Specification.

Figure 4: Overview of the assessment process for the FLF





Source: UKRI FLF documentation: Overview of the assessment process for the FLF – FINAL. Note: More fiscal robustness checks are performed for business applicants post-decision (not reflected above).

The process following the submission of a full application for an FLF comprises of three stages: candidates are assessed by written peer review by sector/discipline experts (stage 1), they are shortlisted by a sift panel (stage 2) and then interviewed by a panel of senior decision makers (stage 3). All Research Councils and Innovate UK colleagues support the delivery of peer review, and they cooperate to select the reviewers for multi- and interdisciplinary proposals.

Written peer review by sector/discipline experts

The peer review is conducted by sector and discipline experts chosen by UKRI.²⁹ Prior to the assessment panels, external peer reviewers assess the applicants.³⁰ For academic applicants, there are academic reviewers. For business applicants or highly commercial applications, UKRI has introduced assessors, individuals who demonstrate business expertise and have a deep understanding of the wider R&D context and the market of the application they are assessing.³¹ FLF scheme managers also aim to include individuals with business experience in different areas of the review panels. The applications are then checked and FLF scheme managers liaise with councils to assign a lead, who will then support that application through assessments. Each application is reviewed by least three reviewers, and each applicant's score ranges from 1–6 and has a brief description.³²

When the reviews are completed, the proposal goes through a 'coverage check' by Research Councils and Innovate UK that makes sure that all its elements have been assessed.³³ The ratio of business to academic reviewers varied across rounds, with the most notable change being the introduction of paid assessors in round 3. In later rounds, specific briefings for both reviewers and panel members were developed to ensure that business applicants were not unfairly disadvantaged, for example due to not holding a PhD.³⁴

When the peer review finishes, responses to applicants are sent to ensure that they can reserve time for the interview stage, if they progress to that stage.³⁵ Applicants are also provided with an opportunity to respond to their written peer review in a two-page document to clarify or correct any issues raised.

Sift panels

The FLF sift panels' aim is to create a scored and prioritised list of proposals. Panel Chairs, Roving Panel Members and Panel Convenors come up with a list of up to ~200 candidates to be considered for interview (this figure is a guideline that may shift depending on the overall quality of applications). The sift panels look at all the documents submitted by the applicants, including their responses to feedback. They are 'moderating panels' and thus do not focus on narrow/specialist disciplines, but on the proposals' cross-disciplinary and cross-sectoral nature, to promote interdisciplinarity. Their aim is to form conclusions considering the interpretation of the specialist peer review reports, the applicants' responses to feedback, and panel members' broad sectoral expertise.³⁶

The sift panel scoring (1–10) is determined by FLF's assessment criteria, which focus on:

- Research and innovation excellence: importance of the project, methodology, the applicants' ability to carry out the project.
- The applicant and their development: their success and the trajectory of their career.

²⁹ UKRI FLF Core Slide Set.

³⁰ Letter to Those Submitting 6 or More Eols, n.d.

³¹ Int_26_Programme-level.

³² UKRI FLF Core Slide Set, n.d.

³³ UKRI FLF Core Slide Set, n.d.

³⁴ Int_26_Programme-level.

³⁵ Int_27_Programme-level.

³⁶ UKRI Future Leaders Fellowships – Round 6 Sift Panel Guidance.

- The project's impact and strategic relevance: societal impacts of the project, whether it addresses a priority set by UKRI.
- The Research and Innovation Environment, and Costs: engagement from the host organisation, UKRI's equality, diversity and inclusion aims.³⁷

The assessment criteria for academic and business applicants are the same. However, the coordinators of the scheme made adjustments to better accommodate business applicants. This included the introduction of one Innovate UK assessor along with two academic assessors per business application from round 4. From round 6, two Innovate UK assessors and one academic assessor were called for business applications while in highly multidisciplinary projects there could be an extra academic assessor. Applicants can request that specific organisations and individuals are not involved in the review of their application in their Cover Letter, noting that this is seen by UKRI and panel members and not by the reviewers. Sift panels take into consideration the peer review comments, the proposal and the applicant response in regard to FLF's assessment criteria.

The proposals are then discussed, ranked and banded (scoring categories [high, medium and low] and bandings [A–D]). Bandings allow candidates to be prioritised across different panels for interview according to how well they addressed the assessment criteria. Banding scores are final and significant for analysis as they can normalise potentially skewed scoring across panels. Banding aims to reduce biases across panels and make the totality of applications simpler to make funding decisions on. Through the banding process UKRI scheme coordinators may promote certain candidates based on UKRI's priorities in each round (e.g. diversity, see Box 1). At this stage, if a roving panel member has noticed behavioural differences across the panels, these will be discussed and considered. Feedback is not given to the applicants at this stage.³⁸

Roving panel members enable the process to be consistent, with the results being the product of 'tensioning across panels'. The roving panel members safeguard the decision making of the panels by observing their members' behaviours in regards issue guidance and the application of the scoring criteria. To put it simply, they ensure that panel X is behaving the same as panel Z. This helps to ensure that outcomes are not unfairly affected by variations in behaviour.

In many cases, more than one council is involved in an application's peer review and many people are involved in the sift (1,223 people across rounds 1–6, Table 16). Each sift panel comprised around 26 people on average and the number of sift panels per round increased from 4–6 in rounds 1–4 to 14 in rounds 5–6. The areas of expertise of each peer reviewer are matched to the relevant interviews. That has allowed reviews to become more specialist while reducing the number of reviewers required. In round 6, sift panel members were organised based on the business applicants' research themes to ensure the panel's expertise is relevant enough to make fair assessment. Additionally, from round 1 moderating panel conveners and chairs are trained about unconscious bias to improve the fairness of the assessment.

A major change to occur in the assessment process was the move to virtual panels in response to restrictions put in place due COVID-19. Sift panels would previously meet face-to-face, which incurs higher monetary and time costs compared to virtual sessions. When

³⁷ UKRI FLF Assessment Criteria.

³⁸ UKRI FLF Core Slide Set.

panels were moved online, they initially spanned a full day, but sessions were then split across two half-days, and they became more accessible to international and business assessors who could participate more easily as opposed to travelling and staying overnight for the meeting. Sift panels remain virtual after being implemented in round 6 largely due to the practicality mentioned above and the cost-saving aspect, at no noticeable cost to quality of review. Significant effort was put into guidance documents and chair preparation for online panel meetings to ensure that the sessions could run smoothly and according to certain rules, as they would in person (e.g. time allowed per introducer).

Interview panels

The applicants with the highest scores (only those that scored at least band B in the sift) are invited for an interview and assessed against the interview criteria. Example interview questions are available online, while the topic areas range from R&I topics, the proposed scheme of work as well as leadership and career development.³⁹ The interview panel focuses on each candidate as an individual, particularly regarding qualities such as leadership potential and suitability. Panel members have a discussion prior to the interview to decide who will ask each question. The questions are standardised, and the panel aims to ask questions in the same way in order to ensure fairness in the process. The convener takes note if the question was asked in a different way and if it is believed that the interview process may be affected (e.g. due to an unexpected question, or one that might be perceived to be unfair), and the candidate may be reinterviewed. Additionally, if a candidate has not sufficiently responded to feedback in the earlier stage, they will be asked again during the technical questions. All applicants are given feedback after the process.⁴⁰

In a typical round, 21 panels interview around 180 candidates over four days. There is an additional panel (usually in February) for candidates who could not attend at their original date. Each panel interviews up to 10 candidates while its members fit broad areas of R&I to ensure that all candidates are 'interviewed by a panel with breadth and depth of expertise'.

Prior to COVID-19, interviews were conducted in person; however the pandemic necessitated the conducting of interviews via Zoom⁴¹ which significantly impacted the process. Online interviews allow the panel chairs and convenors to better control the process (e.g. with ability to monitor each interview and send messages to panel members during the meeting on administrative points, such as question wording). Again, guidance to the chair and members was issued and briefs conducted to ensure the transition online was as smooth as possible. A downside of this is that the panel members develop less of a sense of community between one another, which can be helpful in encouraging members to participate across multiple years. It is also sometimes perceived that an online interview may not allow members to gain a full impression of the candidate. On the other hand, a virtual interview can be very helpful to candidates who may be nervous in an in-person interview, or may have caring responsibilities that make a trip for a short interview difficult. In cases where it is believed that the interviewee's performance was affected negatively, either by the questioning or issues with the technology, the option to reinterview is offered.

³⁹ UKRI FLF Core Slide Set.

⁴⁰ UKRI FLF Core Slide Set.

⁴¹ UKRI Future Leaders Fellowships – Round 6 Interview Panel Guidance.

Over 1,700 people across rounds 1–6 were involved in interview panels (Table 17). Each interview panel typically comprises of 4–6 panellists, who interview around 10 candidates across two days, and the number of panels per round increased from 10–13 in rounds 1–3 to 20–22 in rounds 4–6. Panellists give each applicant a score between 0 and 10, a high/medium/low designation and summary banding (A–D). The decision on who receives the awards is made by the FLF team utilising their banding criteria and guidance from the tensioning process and rovers, though the assessment data indicates only those achieving a band of at least a B are awarded funding.⁴² Unsuccessful applicants can apply to subsequent FLF calls – with a different proposal which addresses the feedback provided. Successful applicants are awarded the funding with the condition that they successfully complete due diligence checks.

2.2. FLF post-award processes

FLF post-award processes involve ongoing monitoring and reporting, leadership development and career support, followed by either an end to the fellowship or an application to extend by three years (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Post-award processes



Source: RAND analysis of FLF documentation.

2.2.1. Reporting using the Researchfish system

Fellows receive their fellowship award after due diligence checks are completed. They then execute their original plan for their research and career development. As already discussed, host organisations must support the fellows significantly. In academia, this entails that the fellow will be offered an ‘open-ended UK based independent research/innovation position, to be taken up during or upon the completion of the fellowship’.⁴³

Fellows report their progress using the Researchfish system.⁴⁴ The submission of research outcomes takes place annually during a six-week period between February and March each year. Business fellows also have similar requirements in regard to reporting in accordance with the assessment criteria. There are no modifications to the questions and not all questions are applicable to business fellows. In a small business, the submission would often be

⁴² UKRI FLF portfolio data. RAND analysis.

⁴³ UKRI Future Leaders Fellowships – Frequently Asked Questions, 2020.

⁴⁴ UKRI Future Leaders Fellowships – Frequently Asked Questions, 2020.

completed by the fellow while in larger companies a financial manager may be responsible. It was perceived that business applications also require more due diligence and fiscal scrutiny.

In an academic setting, the fellowship belongs to the fellow who can move to another host academic institution, at which point further checks are needed to ensure host suitability. However, in a business setting, even though the fellowship still belongs to the individual, it is linked to the business through, for example, pre-determined intellectual property (IP) provisions, making it difficult for the individual to move hosts since the R&D could continue in the business and agreements around IP (contracts outside FLF processes) would restrict the movement of that work outside the organisation.⁴⁵ As an example, in Round 5, there was a case where a business fellow was to leave the host company, thus triggering a need to halt the funding which in turn would have compromised the company's financial stability. A replacement from the company was appointed to take over the fellowship, at which point UKRI completed checks on their suitability. This is an example of UKRI applying flexibility to the FLF's processes as the need arises.

2.2.2. Career development opportunities

During the FLF, fellows are offered a wide range of opportunities for career development such as training and development opportunities, networking, and collaboration opportunities, as well as an externally administered mentoring programme. There are also cohort events which include starting meetings per cohort and annual events for all. Namely, at the beginning of each round, there is a one-day event for the recipient cohort where the development network is introduced, and they meet the research council representatives. A conference is also organised every year for all fellows.

UKRI-wide activities involve networking meetings held by UKRI councils.⁴⁶ The fellows can also apply for the FLF Development Network Pathway programme which supports their professional development. Furthermore, 60 fellows can undertake specialised leadership training, with networking, mentoring and collaborative opportunities.⁴⁷ The development network is a unique support mechanism in that it aims to create a sense of a community of fellows across institutions. This kind of support at this scale with multiple functions does not exist in other similar schemes. The Development Network Trust fund is also available to fellows, who can apply to it for money to collaborate and pitch for a specific event or for smaller research projects.

The fellows can extend their four-year fellowship by up to three years. The renewal should constitute the continuation of the original project as it has progressed. Thus, the research could have a different direction according to that progress. The fellow is allowed to change host organisation or sector if justified.⁴⁸

2.2.3. Post-award set-up

Evidence highlights how the setting up of **the FLF scheme's post-award due diligence processes for business awardees drew from Innovate UK's expertise**. Innovate UK

⁴⁵ Int_26_Programme-level.

⁴⁶ UKRI FLF Core Slide Set, n.d.

⁴⁷ UKRI FLF Development Network Pathway Programme.

⁴⁸ Renewal Scheme for Current Future Leaders Fellows.

experts who are familiar with business monitoring were consulted in partnership with FLF's bespoke Business Team on the design of similar processes for FLF business applications. In general, due diligence is a key consideration for business applications due to Subsidy Control and State Aid arrangements that preceded Subsidy Control, which call for examining the implications of government funding on business performance and considering whether or not they had already received a certain level of public funding.⁴⁹ This required ensuring that there were appropriate checks embedded into the existing UKRI infrastructure that monitored businesses. For the FLF scheme, these due diligence checks were developed in consultation with Innovate UK experts and implemented from rounds 3 through 6.⁵⁰ Conversely, an additional finding is that this **due diligence process created additional time delays for the receipt of funds**, adding an average of eight weeks of checks to a process that already had lengthy timelines. Finally, there were some notable **issues associated with use of the JeS system for administering business grants**. In particular, the manner in which the system is designed to automate the transfer of funds to business does not allow for the level of flexibility required of the scheme. This meant that for businesses that followed more non-linear financial models, UKRI staff expended a lot of time and effort to manually process transactions, which is not a sustainable approach given that business applicants are projected to rise in future rounds.⁵¹

2.3. Evolution of FLF pre- and post-award processes

The evolution of the scheme's call process with regards to business engagement has been spurred on by UKRI's willingness to go through multiple iterations of their approach. Examples of this include the recognition of the fact that business-based communities often tend to use a wider range of communication channels than academia typically does, and pivoting accordingly to engage with them on Twitter and the Innovate blog,⁵² and the acknowledgement of the need to emphasise the flexibility of the scheme for businesses in terms of timings and funding.⁵³ The evolution of the scheme and the iterative changes in approach started from having no business fellows in the first two rounds, to acknowledging the feasibility of business involvement, with the focus subsequently shifting to attracting business applicants, increasing the cohort significantly by round 5, and addressing their concerns in a manner that has been recognised and acknowledged by fellows.⁵⁴ The focus of UKRI in rounds 5 and 6 shifted to increasing the spectrum and quality of businesses and applications while looking at comparative success rates between academia and business to increase the impact of the scheme⁵⁵ As detailed above, this shift in focus on quality is the most likely cause of the sharp increase in the number of unsuccessful applicants between rounds 4 and 5.

⁴⁹ Int_26_Programme-level.

⁵⁰ Int_26_Programme-level.

⁵¹ Int_26_Programme-level.

⁵² Int_27_Programme-level.

⁵³ FLF Project Board Minutes – September 2020.

⁵⁴ Int_11_Fellow_R3_Business, Int_26_Programme-level.

⁵⁵ Int_26_Programme-level.

The next chapter analyses the processes described thus far in terms of their effectiveness, relevance and coherence against the evaluation question themes.

3. Evaluation of the FLF scheme's successes (what worked well)

This chapter outlines the successes of the FLF scheme, particularly in terms of its uniqueness in the R&I funding sector, its openness and flexibility, and its post-award support and associated success factors. It draws heavily upon interview evidence from fellows and hosts on what has worked well for them as well as from scheme management, who described how process changes were made and what impact they had operationally.

3.1. Uniqueness of the FLF scheme

The main objective of the FLF scheme is to support the next generation of research leaders, across sectors and disciplines. The FLF website homepage states that the FLF is unique because it is an extended, cross-UKRI scheme with no barriers to the kinds of R&I fellows can conduct, based anywhere in the UK, and because it covers UK and international business and academia applicants.⁵⁶ There is also a focus on inter- and multidisciplinary strategic research areas, academia-industry engagement, talent retention and EDI.

Fellowship schemes are by no means new funding instruments, and in fact date back in the UK to the Royal Society's first grants, famously awarded to notable leaders in their fields such as Sir Isaac Newton. Nevertheless, the FLF aims to occupy a unique position within the landscape of early-career researcher schemes in the UK, supporting both UK and international researchers working in a wide range of disciplines and sectors, and encouraging novel and interdisciplinary research projects. Again, these features can be found elsewhere, but the inclusivity of FLF sets it apart from its peers.

The FLF's objectives on their own are not unique, but packaged together, they are. Most fellowships do not span across UKRI councils (cross-disciplinary), and the FLF includes academia and business, UK and overseas. Host support is required (more so than usual) and there is a comprehensive post-award offering of development and coaching support. Since the FLF launched, there have been no other opportunities with such an inclusive approach to funding individual researchers, in the UK and internationally.⁵⁷ The FLF scheme was one of the first attempts to assess academic and industry applicants together as part of the selection process.⁵⁸ There was also a deliberate attempt to better provide for fellows' development

⁵⁶ UKRI FLF Homepage.

⁵⁷ Int_25_Programme-level, Int_21_Fellow_R6_Academic.

⁵⁸ Int_27_Programme-level.

needs post-award, designed into the scheme, than was typically considered for UK fellowship schemes.⁵⁹

While existing alongside a number of other early career fellowship schemes, FLF occupies a unique position within the R&I landscape. Most other schemes focus on specific disciplinary or subject area domains (see Table 2). The FLF, by contrast, is a pan-UKRI scheme supporting fellows working in a wide range of disciplines and sectors. Under the FLF, UKRI has developed new approaches to allow more fellows to work with and in businesses (as well as public sector and charitable bodies), while also encouraging novel and interdisciplinary projects. Moreover, unlike most other schemes, the FLF has emphasised long-term support to researchers – offering four to seven years of funding – with the aim of facilitating the transition of talented researchers into positions of leadership and independence. A key benefit of the Marie Skłodowska-Curie postdoctoral fellowships and the Human Frontier Science Program (HFSP) fellowship programme is the option for mobility across countries and institutions. The FLF does allow mobility between institutions (subject to relevant checks), though not between countries. A full tabular analysis of the comparator schemes is included in Section Annex C.

Table 2: Fellowship comparators – simplified

Comparator	Key elements	Key differences to FLF
Henry Dale Fellowships – Wellcome/Royal Society	Biomedical, significant postdoc experience, comparable funding (£1.2m), L&D, 5+3 model	Limited to biomedical disciplines only, narrower eligibility scope, academic only
European Research Council Starting Grants	Any field, 2–7 academic postdoc yrs only, EUR1.5m, 5yrs	Academics only, shorter-term, narrower eligibility years
US National Institutes of Health Early Research Career Development programmes	Health related, salary based, institutional allowance, 5yrs, payback aspect, independence	Obligation to pay back via research, shorter-term, narrower disciplinary area
Marie Skłodowska-Curie postdoctoral fellowships	Any field, up to 8yrs post-PhD, L&D, placement, 1–3yrs long, resubmission restrictions, salary, EU	Resubmission restrictions, academic only though some industry placements, useful mobility function FLF lacks
The Human Frontier Science Program (HFSP) fellowship programme	Life sciences, salary based, living allowance, HFSP countries, 3yrs post PhD, 3yrs duration	Limited to life sciences, mobility, and travel benefits, much shorter than FLF

Source: RAND analysis, see Annex C for more details.

3.1.1. Wider stakeholder perspectives on the uniqueness of the FLF scheme

The clear message from fellows is that the most beneficial unique aspect of the FLF is its flexible and inclusive approach to eligibility. Fellows commented that the FLF opportunity was open ended, long term, inclusive (e.g. sector/discipline, childcare) and struck a good balance between scientific quality and a commitment to developing the leadership capabilities of the fellow, while also encouraging cross-disciplinary working.⁶⁰ The FLF is considered to fill a gap in the funding landscape, in that it is accessible to those transitioning

⁵⁹ Int_29_Programme-level.

⁶⁰ INT_01, 02, 09, 15, 16, 20.

into leadership, no matter the sector or discipline, and focuses on more than the individual's publication record.⁶¹ Fellows commented that the FLF gives researchers the flexibility to pursue the ideas that are important to them, while providing the security to also apply for other more ambitious sources of funding and have protected time for professional development.⁶² The FLF appears to fill a gap for early career 'established' colleagues who may have permanent positions but still need a scheme to develop their leadership skills to the next step, showing an openness in the eligibility criteria.

In some cases, the openness of the scheme caused practical problems, albeit solvable ones, for fellows and hosts.⁶³ One host commented that the openness of the scheme made the internal sifting (the initial selection of applicants within institutions before applying formally) more difficult compared to Research Council specific schemes, due to the large numbers eligible for this attractive scheme. Demand was managed internally, though this required additional resource. One fellow found that although the scheme invited a range of researchers to become fellows, the resulting Development Network was too academia focused, indicating a need to ensure the Development Network caters equally well to industry fellows.⁶⁴ Another also praised the flexibility and inclusiveness of the eligibility criteria, but commented that this only works if non-academics understand they are eligible and hear about the FLF. They added that UKRI had been agile in responding to industry needs since the earlier rounds.⁶⁵ In one other case, the inclusivity of the FLF criteria did not translate to their organisation's internal sift, where only permanent staff were put forward, though others found the internal sift process beneficial compared to most schemes.⁶⁶ More broadly, the FLF was considered to be a major, cross-cutting scheme across councils that was relatively rare in the UK funding landscape for individual researchers. One host commented that the FLF compared better than individually led Research Council fellowships as it better catered for researchers who operate across council disciplines.⁶⁷

More broadly, fellows found the FLF to be comparably better than other schemes they had knowledge and/or experience of. For example, fellows and hosts found the assessment was simple, transparent and fair compared to others.⁶⁸ Stakeholders tended to compare the FLF favourably when considering other schemes they had participated in, in terms of the length of the FLF proposal (compared to the Henry Dale Fellowships), there being less perceived bias in the interviewing process (compared to past experiences), the clarity and transparency of selection processes (compared to those of Wellcome and the British Academy), and having a clear remit and useful feedback (particularly for business fellows). However, in some cases, fellows and hosts found the scheme application and reporting to be

⁶¹ INT_13.

⁶² INT_03.

⁶³ INT_32.

⁶⁴ INT_15.

⁶⁵ INT_11.

⁶⁶ INT_24, 08.

⁶⁷ INT_32.

⁶⁸ INT_06, 09, 13, 17, 22, 30.

comparable to others in terms of burden, indicating that although there are positives in the process, they may not be significant factors.⁶⁹

Industry fellows were broadly positive about the scheme, with some small issues around the fact they are non-academic researchers.⁷⁰ Industry fellows appreciate the long-term aspect of the funding and the amount of funding available, though one suggested that the option for shorter fellowships may better suit some businesses whose R&D timelines may be more rapid than traditional academic schemes of research. Another industry fellow suggested that other fellowships (e.g. from RAEng) are better suited for business post-award support, such as Scaling the Edge (Innovate UK). Though an isolated example, one applicant declined their FLF offer as they had multiple other fellowships with which they wished to combine funding with FLF, which was not possible for UKRI. There may be a question around whether the FLF can be combined with other schemes, and what the thresholds might be around how many schemes one can combine, to what value and over how long. Another fellow suggested that the host institution could be decided post-award instead of the current practice of having to list an agreed host in the application, though this may reduce the confidence in assessors as to the stability and assurance of support the fellow might receive. It may provide some flexibility to the fellow in being able to offer their ideal organisation a funded fellowship.

3.2. Support of EDI

As identified above, a key benefit and differentiator of the FLF scheme is its openness and flexibility for applicants. Equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) is a key monitoring indicator for UKRI in their grant funding and is an important feature of its people and talent strategy, which FLF makes a large contribution to achieving. We look first in this section at the extent to which the portfolio of awardees reflects UKRI-wide figures as well as the general proportions and the funding awarded versus requested per group, before discussing our qualitative findings.

3.2.1. EDI figures

We conducted analyses of the FLF management database to compare the numbers of fellows by their personal characteristics. A simple analysis of the proportions of fellows by protected characteristics is included in Annex D.

In general, EDI data variables (e.g. gender, ethnicity) reflected those at the wider UKRI level. Over time, the success rates of applicants from different backgrounds tended to converge, indicating that an equalising effect has occurred as the rounds have progressed. In many cases, the application success rates of underrepresented groups (e.g. female applicants) tended to be higher than overrepresented groups (e.g. males).

3.2.2. Geographical analysis

FLF spend figures diverged in some regional areas compared to UKRI averages but largely reflected typical allocations (2020–21, Table 3, Figure 6). On average, more funding was distributed to fellows hosted at institutions in Scotland, London and Yorkshire and the Humber than UKRI averages, compared to the South East and East of England where 11 per cent and five per cent less funding was awarded compared to UKRI averages. These figures

⁶⁹ INT_17, 30.

⁷⁰ INT_23, 22, 33.

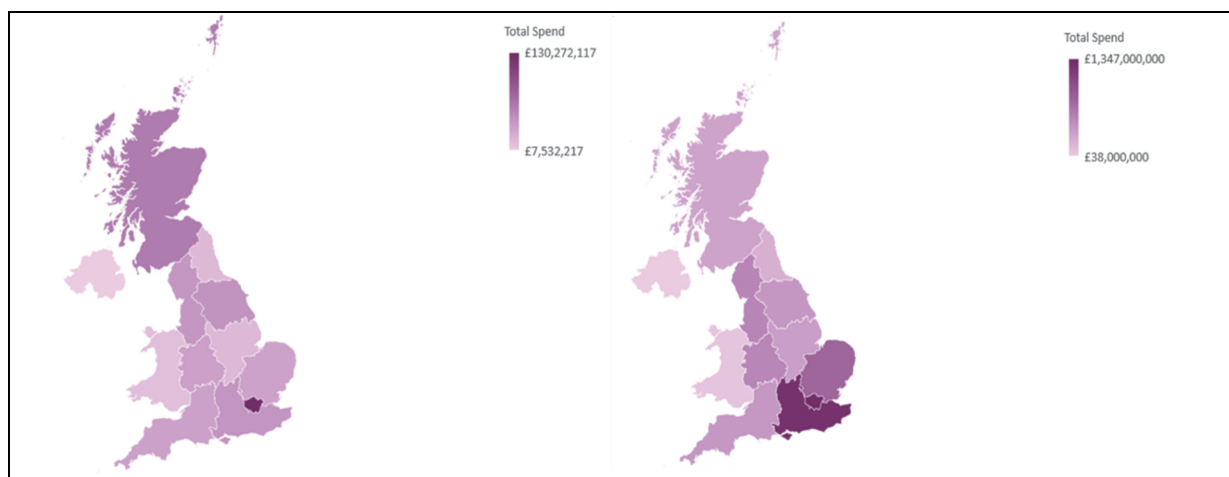
did not change significantly across rounds. The reason for these differing figures is not clear from other data sources collected as part of this evaluation, and it was not possible to filter UKRI data based on award type (e.g. fellowships). However, it may indicate that FLFs are more accessible to those based outside of the East and Southeast compared to typical grants, though it must be noted that London retains the highest proportion of funds. Efforts could be made to diversify applicant host institutions via targeted outreach (e.g. aligning with the levelling-up agenda).

Table 3: FLF awardee host location by ITL1 regions compared to UKRI-wide figures

Region	FLF		UKRI 2020–21		FLF difference to UKRI totals
	Total spend	Percentage	Total spend	Percentage	
London	£130,272,117	26%	£1,347,000,000	21%	5%
Scotland	£63,040,182	13%	£328,000,000	5%	7%
Yorkshire and the Humber	£46,857,408	9%	£424,000,000	7%	3%
South East	£45,389,880	9%	£1,287,000,000	20%	-11%
North West	£44,179,506	9%	£552,000,000	9%	0%
West Midlands	£37,567,871	7%	£546,000,000	8%	-1%
South West	£36,886,667	7%	£423,000,000	7%	1%
East of England	£35,318,196	7%	£803,000,000	12%	-5%
East Midlands	£20,103,099	4%	£372,000,000	6%	-2%
North East	£19,858,769	4%	£237,000,000	4%	0%
Wales	£16,993,291	3%	£92,000,000	1%	2%
Northern Ireland	£7,532,217	1%	£38,000,000	1%	1%

Source: RAND Analysis of UKRI grant data and UKRI geographical spend data 2020–21.⁷¹ Note: number of awardees was not available at the ITL1 level from the UKRI website.

Figure 6: Comparison of FLF spend versus UKRI spend



Source: RAND Analysis of UKRI grant data and UKRI geographical spend data 2020–21. Note: number of awardees was not available at the ITL1 level from the UKRI website.

⁷¹ UKRI Geographical distribution of spend data financial year 2020–21. As of 15 December 2023: <https://www.ukri.org/publications/geographical-distribution-of-spend-data-financial-year-2020-to-2021/>

3.2.3. Diverse academic disciplines

Evidence on how eligibility criteria and the application process have (or have not) supported applications from diverse disciplines (e.g. from arts and humanities) is predominantly positive. The scheme is seen as highly supportive of interdisciplinary research particularly in niche areas where researchers have struggled to find where to fit in in the past.⁷² The scheme is also viewed as lending itself to unconventional research topics because of its flexibility and openness to multidisciplinary.⁷³ Finally, the scheme's support for diverse academic applications has been bolstered by active steps taken by the UKRI to engage with different types of host institutions, recognising that it was more difficult for some organisations, whose recruitment models (including the creation of posts and commitment to an open-ended contracts) do not favour the FLF, to engage with the scheme.⁷⁴

FLF fellows' disciplines are characterised by one topic category in the FLF portfolio data. There are 120 different topics derived from Dimensions categories for disciplines; around 80 of these were used by UKRI to characterise fellows (or these were self-selected in the application). The evaluation team gave three broad categorisations to those 80 topics: Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics; Social Science; and Arts and Humanities.

Table 4 gives a snapshot of the top five subject areas (the most granular categorisation) within the broad disciplinary categories mentioned above. The most numerous awards were made to biochemistry and cell biology, materials engineering, and public health and health services. Another layer of analysis, if the data were available, would be to compare this to UKRI overall averages for awards in subject areas, to assess whether FLFs deviated from UKRI-wide trends in terms of the subjects it funds.

⁷² Int_13, 24.

⁷³ Int_20.

⁷⁴ FLF Project Board Minutes – July 2019.

Table 4: Top five subject areas per broad subject category

Subject areas	Total awards
STEM (80 subjects)	
0601 Biochemistry and Cell Biology	33
0912 Materials Engineering	30
0201 Astronomical and Space Sciences	25
0801 Artificial Intelligence and Image Processing	18
0202 Atomic, Molecular, Nuclear, Particle and Plasma Physics	17
Social Sciences (22 subjects)	
1117 Public Health and Health Services	30
1701 Psychology	14
1608 Sociology	9
1606 Political Science	6
1605 Policy and Administration	5
Arts and Humanities (18 subjects)	
2103 Historical Studies	10
1801 Law	7
2004 Linguistics	5
1904 Performing Arts and Creative Writing	4
2002 Cultural Studies	3

Source: RAND Analysis of UKRI grant data. Note: The three broad subject groupings were constructed from 120 dimensions categories of subject area and are illustrative only.

Additionally, Table 5 shows there have been many more STEM subject fellows than from other broad subject areas. This was consistent across all rounds. STEM subject fellows also tended to be more successful than others. This illustrative data requires further validation to explore the reasons behind the albeit small differences.

Table 5: Overall proportion and success rates per broad disciplinary area across all rounds

	Arts and Humanities (18 subjects)	Social Sciences (22 subjects)	STEM (80 subjects)
Proportion	8% (n=40)	17% (n=84)	75% (n=375)
Success rate	13%	15%	17%

Source: RAND Analysis of UKRI grant data. Note: 'n' is number of successful applicants. Success rate calculated using intradisciplinary numbers. The above three groupings were constructed from 120 dimensions categories of subject area and are illustrative only.

Evidence on the extent to which the review processes have (or have not) been appropriate to support applications from diverse disciplines was predominantly positive. Applicants found the interview panellists to have appropriate subject-matter expertise to review each of their topics,⁷⁵ and found that the overall combination of interview panel and peer reviewers appropriately covered all aspects of applicants' proposals.⁷⁶ More

⁷⁵ Int_06, 07, 14, 16.

⁷⁶ Int_08.

specifically, findings show that there was sufficient crossover in expertise and focus areas across the interview panel members to ensure that relevant questions to each application were asked.⁷⁷ Applicants also found the review process to be fair and open to different research topics, methods and approaches,⁷⁸ ensuring the support of diverse academic applications.

Overall, the FLF scheme's call processes have been largely successful in reaching diverse academic audiences. This is because the scheme's inter- and cross-disciplinary focus has been one of the key factors attracting prospective fellows to the FLF; indeed, support for cross-disciplinary research is clearly stipulated in the application guidance. Despite this, the scheme has been less successful in attracting applicants in Arts and Humanities subjects where, particularly in earlier rounds, the language of the scheme's call was seen as focused more on STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects. As one fellow surmised, the STEM-focused language of the call made them feel like 'a second-class citizen in the application process and that I wasn't what they were looking for' as the call was 'laden with language that made you feel that a humanities researcher was really pushing it to try and think about applying to this'. The STEM-focused language was described as being in the subtext of application documents including in the kinds of costs and the kinds of paths of impact that applicants were required to submit. Related to this is the observation that there is no customised announcement of how the project is unique. Even in later rounds, some fellows stated that they discovered the scheme's unique features only after visiting the UKRI website, making the argument for the need to customise or tailor the call by discipline. Despite the observations around the STEM-focused language of the call, the consensus from interviewed fellows is that the scheme is as well-communicated as any other opportunity for grant applications, and that scheme's aim of reaching applicants from diverse disciplines has been realised.

3.2.4. Diverse individual circumstances

This section presents evidence on how eligibility criteria and the application process have (or have not) supported applications from individuals with specific personal circumstances beyond those described above.

Evidence on how eligibility criteria and the application process have supported the wider diversity of applications

Findings from fellow interviews show that the scheme has been successful in supporting wider diversity of applicants and ensuring inclusivity by putting in place strategies to reduce and remove barriers to application for the FLF. The scheme's inclusivity is assured by including options such as job sharing, part-time working and the inclusion of those returning from career breaks (described as a substantive period of time spent outside research/innovation).⁷⁹ In addition to this, the diversity of applicants has been supported by the lack of restriction on the number of years post-PhD, thus making the scheme more open to a wider array of early career applicants.⁸⁰ Relatedly, applicants without a strong publication record found the scheme to be

⁷⁷ Int_13.

⁷⁸ Int_09.

⁷⁹ Int_27; UKRI Future Leaders Fellowships – Career Breaks and Flexible Working.

⁸⁰ Int_06, 17.

inclusive as factors such as this were not the sole focus of the scheme.⁸¹ The ability to submit application documents such as CVs in multiple formats has been lauded,⁸² as has the support through the scheme of applicants with children. Here, some fellows reported the higher level of support for childcare cover within the FLF compared to other grants⁸³ and the flexibility of the scheme⁸⁴ to be one of the key considerations in their decisions to apply for the fellowship. Finally, one fellow described how the university invited him to apply for the scheme based on his being part of the LGBTQ community.⁸⁵ This suggests that there might be targeted recruitment by universities of applicants with specific protected characteristics, further supporting the wider diversity of applications.

Evidence on how eligibility criteria and the application process have not supported the wider diversity of applicants

Despite these comprehensive strides in supporting the wider diversity of applications, challenges still remain. While there was support for applicants with children, some fellows found childcare responsibilities limiting in various stages of the application process.⁸⁶ Similarly, some applicants felt apprehensive about applying and were deterred by the under-representation of certain ethnicities in the historical cohort of fellows.⁸⁷ In addition, despite the openness of the scheme to applicants at all stages of their careers post-PhD, the application process has been described as intimidating to early career researchers⁸⁸ and there is a reported grey area in guidance from universities about the career stage applicants need to have reached in order to apply for the scheme.⁸⁹ This suggests a mismatch between the intentions of the scheme as envisaged by the UKRI, and the practical realities in terms of probability of success as determined by potential fellows and their host institutions. Further to this, one fellow pertinently observed that ‘the academic language used, the platforms, the manner in which you apply creates cultural and technological barriers to applying’,⁹⁰ further highlighting this incongruity of the scheme’s intentions and how these intentions are realised and perceived by applicants.

We now turn to the evidence on how review processes have (or have not) supported applications from diverse ethnicities. While some fellows found the interview panels to be sufficiently diverse in terms of sectors and genders,⁹¹ there was at least one instance where the ethnic diversity of panellists was problematic. In this case, the fellow noted how there was no one from an African or Black background, which the fellow found concerning given the topic was about Pan-Africanism, and recommended the panels be more diverse in terms of

⁸¹ Int_13.

⁸² Int_03.

⁸³ Int_16.

⁸⁴ Int_23.

⁸⁵ Int_01.

⁸⁶ Int_04.

⁸⁷ Int_08.

⁸⁸ Int_20.

⁸⁹ Int_16.

⁹⁰ Int_18.

⁹¹ Int_03, 12.

geographic location.⁹² Notably, the FLF board has been seriously considering and taking steps to monitor EDI across the scheme. The board has been interrogating the diversity of panel member composition,⁹³ has provided a clear steer on gender balance,⁹⁴ and has expressed concerns where monitoring data such as geographic spread, institutional spread, gender, ethnicity, age and sector has not been in line with the Executive Committee’s guidance.⁹⁵

These findings are further analysed and elaborated on in the case study described in Box 1 below, which focuses on the positive action taken on EDI.

Box 1: Case study: Positive action on EDI

Case study: Positive action on EDI

This case study explores the ‘positive action’ taken by UKRI to boost the number of ethnic minority applicants progressing to the interview stage at the FLF round 6 sift panels. The proposal for positive action was taken in response to a review of applicant and awardee data, with recognition that existing controls do not fully mitigate the risk of low diversity. Positive action was introduced as a one-time mitigating measure against the impact on diversity due to the increased number of applications at round 6. This case study describes the actions being taken by UKRI to support the FLF scheme’s objective of fostering a more equal, diverse and inclusive R&I workforce.

Developing the positive action:

The diversity of applicants is analysed by four aspects of personal characteristics, age, gender, disability and ethnicity. The applicant and awardee portfolio was monitored every round, and at round 5 the project team noticed a reduction in the success rate for ethnic minority applicants. Applicants were given a score and a banding (A–D), and ethnic minority applicants tended to cluster in Band B. Up until round 4, candidates in band A and B could be taken forward to the interview stage. From round 5, however, only those in band A were interviewed due to the extremely high volume of applications. To ensure a fair playing field for all applicants, the project team proposed to take positive action: after taking forward all the candidates in Band A, they escalated ethnic minority applicants in Band B to the interview stage if they had the exact same scores as a white applicant who did not progress to interview. The proposals for positive action and an EDI policy were deliberated at several Project Board meetings (and with legal/EDI teams) before being taken to the highest level of UKRI for approval, and they were finally implemented for round 6.

Effectiveness of the measures:

After the implementation, 19 per cent of applicants taken to the interview stage were from an ethnic minority, which is more proportional to the population working in academia compared to previous rounds. The positive action promoted 11 ethnic minority candidates with borderline probability of success to interview, who scored the same as white applicants that would not be going forward. This increased the ethnic minority success rate for being invited to interview to 20 per cent and had no impact on the white applicant success rate (23 per cent). Drawing on applicant data from other rounds, the success rates for different ethnic communities are less scattered at round 6 compared to previous rounds, indicating the positive action has been effective in making the selection process diverse and inclusive.

Challenges in implementation:

In general, the positive action was supported by the panel members and academics involved. The project team was aware of possible political tensions and backlashes, and thus only escalated ethnic minority applicants based on an equal score. UKRI originally wanted to introduce positive

⁹² Int_20.

⁹³ FLF Project Board Minutes – November 2021.

⁹⁴ FLF Project Board Minutes – December 2018.

⁹⁵ ‘FLF Project Board Minutes - September 2020’.

action at round 5; however, this was not approved because there was not enough time for sign-off and concerns were raised within UKRI as to the methodology behind the positive action.

Key learnings:

- The proposal failed at its first attempt due to time constraints, but the team learnt from this and made sure that everything was lined up before round 6. The approval process at this point was efficient as the team knew where to go and who to talk to at each stage.
- The project team could have further analysed personal characteristics data, such as comparing the different underrepresented groups across different disciplines. Nevertheless, this would add complexity to implementation.

3.3. Post-award support from UKRI to fellows

Regarding post-award support from UKRI to fellows, evidence suggests **that fellows have found UKRI post-award support helpful**. This can largely be attributed to having a dedicated post-award team which is responsible for responding to fellows' queries and questions and is tasked with fellow-facing administrative functions such as issuing the quarterly newsletters, running annual conferences, and holding the introductory starting meetings for fellows.⁹⁶ Fellows have described this team as being flexible, understanding, supportive and friendly,⁹⁷ and as providing helpful, swift and personalised advice.⁹⁸ Examples cited by fellows include how the post-award team provided advice on no cost extensions,⁹⁹ financial regulation for business,¹⁰⁰ apportioning funds,¹⁰¹ visa issues¹⁰² and on resolving technical issues.¹⁰³ One fellow noted how this level of support was not affected by the frequent changes of personnel at UKRI, stating that despite the changes making it 'difficult to keep track of who you are dealing with', the support was always available.¹⁰⁴ The FLF post-award package was also the most comprehensive compared to comparators. The Henry Dale Fellowships were the only other scheme reviewed that offered dedicated learning and development support, though this was not to the scale of FLF.

3.3.1. Progress reporting/monitoring

This section presents evidence regarding how post-award financial and progress reporting requirements have (or have not) supported fellows, including suitability for different types of fellows. The main progress reporting and monitoring mechanism used by the FLF scheme is Researchfish. In addition, UKRI is also capturing data through starting, mid- and end-term surveys. UKRI is also exploring additional methods to capture data on the impact of

⁹⁶ Int_28.

⁹⁷ Int_05, 06.

⁹⁸ Int_04, 07, 24.

⁹⁹ Int_08.

¹⁰⁰ Int_18.

¹⁰¹ Int_15.

¹⁰² Int_20.

¹⁰³ Int_20.

¹⁰⁴ Int_10.

fellowships including more structured ways to extract ‘good news stories’, potentially modelled on the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) impact prize.¹⁰⁵

In general, **monitoring and reporting mechanisms have not been viewed as onerous**. Monitoring processes were described as not burdensome and as appropriate¹⁰⁶ and for some fellows, Researchfish has been described as straightforward and not burdensome.¹⁰⁷ The reporting mechanisms have also been seen as suitable and proportionate for business compared to other UKRI schemes,¹⁰⁸ and annual reporting was described as ‘working well’, in part due its flexibility.¹⁰⁹ However, the **evidence on the appropriateness and clarity of Researchfish is mixed**, with some fellows reporting that it is not always suitable for reporting business outputs as some of the questions are less applicable to business, resulting in these questions being left blank or answered poorly.¹¹⁰ There is also a reported lack of clarity on what should be reported through Researchfish,¹¹¹ and the extent to which it is the most appropriate channel to report impact narratives for individual fellows has been questioned.¹¹²

3.3.2. FLF Development Network

During the early rounds of the FLF scheme, the UKRI conducted consultations on what post-award support would be helpful, which fed into the establishment of the Development Network.¹¹³ The Network subsequently became the core of the FLF scheme’s post-award support offering, with the aim of providing professional development opportunities on a cohort basis, and putting in place bespoke training courses.¹¹⁴ The FLF Development Network seeks to promote a sense of camaraderie and collegiality across cohorts as well as to encourage and support the formation of new interdisciplinary collaborations,¹¹⁵ offering a wide range of post-award support, structured around three strands: the training and development strand, the community building strand and the research and innovation environment strand. The strands were designed to cross-fertilise in line with the deliverables highlighted in Figure 7.

¹⁰⁵ Int_28.

¹⁰⁶ Int_02, 05.

¹⁰⁷ Int_10, 15.

¹⁰⁸ Int_14, 15.

¹⁰⁹ Int_15.

¹¹⁰ Int_26.

¹¹¹ Int_07.













¹¹² Int_09.

¹¹³ Int_28.

¹¹⁴ Int_28.

¹¹⁵ Int_28.

Figure 7: Development Network strands

Training & Development	Community & Cohort Experience	Research & Innovation Environment
 Leadership development workshops and retreats	 Four-strand mentoring scheme	 Specialist Knowledge Exchange, Innovation and Policy Engagement Managers
 Asynchronous resources, toolkits	 Themed, fellow-led coffee mornings	 “Under the Hood” sessions with colleagues from UKRI and BEIS
 One-to-one professional coaching focused on personal career development	 Internal funding scheme: Plus Funds designed to further the aims of the network	 Direct Access to cross-sectoral leaders through “Research Exchange Days” and “How To” session
 Bespoke 360 feedback and coaching focused on management and leadership skills	 Access to Community Manager to form development pathways	 Interdisciplinary, collaborative “Crucibles” events with pump priming for proof-of-concept

Source: Future Leaders Fellowships Development Network – About the Network, 2023.

The Development Network was commissioned through two contracts tendered through an open, competitive process, with both being won by a consortium of academic and business partners led by the University of Edinburgh. The first contract was for cohorts 1–3, whilst the second, which started in January 2022, covers rounds 4, 5 and 6 fellows.¹¹⁶ The Network’s current team comprises core partners from nine industrial and higher education institutions (University of Edinburgh, Cardiff University, Queen’s University Belfast, University of Leeds, School of Advanced Study University of London, Vertical Future, University of Cambridge, University of Glasgow, University College London) as well as additional external partners who support the delivery of network activities.¹¹⁷

The Development Network describes itself as having a deliberately responsive and ‘reactive’ approach, recognising that FLFs are innovators who provide invaluable feedback on post-award support processes and mechanisms.¹¹⁸ As the number of business fellows has increased across cohorts, the Development Network has tried to improve the suitability of its offering to business. Understanding that business fellows have different needs in terms of training and networking opportunities, innovations such as inviting fellows to suggest suitable

¹¹⁶ Int_28.

¹¹⁷ Int_29.

¹¹⁸ Int_29.

mentors have been put in place.¹¹⁹ This responsiveness was built into the process as the UKRI ensured that all bidders had to demonstrate that they understood the differences between fellows in academia and in business.¹²⁰ The consortium that won the bid to become the FLF Development Network knew that they had to broaden the offer as part of their proposal for the second contract by bringing in a research and innovation environment strand of delivery which considered a broad range of training and development options, emphasised cross-sectoral deliverables, and focused on human resources, including the hiring of a knowledge exchange manager.¹²¹ The Development Network also consists of a non-executive advisory board, comprising people from different sectors and experiences, which meets bi-annually and are kept up to date on monthly project activities.¹²² The Development Network has also placed a strong emphasis on embedding EDI considerations in its offering and processes, drawing from previous experience of Network members in Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC)'s 'inclusion matters' projects, taking into account any factors such as disability and caring responsibilities that might affect mobility by investing in appropriate technologies, and appointing an EDI manager and consultant who is sufficiently removed from the UKRI to be objective.¹²³

Overarching challenges that the Development Network has faced

Since its formation, the Development Network has had to overcome several challenges. Firstly, **the establishment of the Network through two separate contracts has created some administrative challenges for the consortium**, despite the fact that a strategic decision was taken to operate and present this as one network.¹²⁴ The back-ends of the two contracts are run separately, with two sets of KPIs and two separate budgeting, monitoring and reporting requirements, resulting in administrative complexities around how the contracts are constructed.¹²⁵ The Network has also faced **challenges related to internal staff**, with under-staffing and the loss of key members of staff prior to the second contract being awarded creating some initial internal difficulties.¹²⁶ **Fellow engagement** has also presented some challenges to the Network as fellows struggle to prioritise professional development among other commitments and responsibilities. The Network has recently put in place strategies to increase engagement including developing more time-limited opportunities, and more clearly setting out the structure of when opportunities are going to be available so that fellows can better plan their participation.¹²⁷ Lastly, the first iteration of the Network was beginning to deliver events when **the COVID-19 pandemic** struck, resulting, at the time, in low engagement due to the cancellation of scheduled in-person events and virtual meeting fatigue.¹²⁸

¹¹⁹ Int_26.

¹²⁰ Int_26.

¹²¹ Int_29.

¹²² Int_29.

¹²³ Int_29.

¹²⁴ Int_29.

¹²⁵ Int_29.

¹²⁶ Int_29.

¹²⁷ Int_28.

¹²⁸ Int_29.

Evidence that the Development Network has supported fellows' professional development

The Leadership Retreat and Mentorship Programme have both been described by fellows as positive experiences that have provided high-quality learning and professional development opportunities.¹²⁹ In addition to these opportunities, the Development Network's 'Plus Funding' has supported cross-fellow collaboration and facilitated the production of resources for the wider community of fellows (and the larger research community).¹³⁰ More broadly, the Network has helped to connect fellows to leading experts in their respective fields and to develop new skills through coaching, providing learning opportunities beyond what universities typically offer.¹³¹ The Network has also supported self-reflection through 360 feedback and through collaboration opportunities with other fellows.¹³² In this way, the Development Network has offered a wide range of opportunities including specific tailored activities for industry fellows,¹³³ and has been adaptive and responsive to fellows' needs.

Areas with potential for further improvement

Some areas with potential for further improvement, including examples of additional initiatives that could be added to the offering, have been raised by fellows. Firstly, it has been noted that there is **potential for more linking of fellows to policy and media stakeholders**. Where this has occurred, it has happened through a fellow's own initiative, without much support and direction from the UKRI.¹³⁴ Secondly, **although there has been some academic-business engagement, fellows would like to see more of this** as a few of them reported limited academic-business interaction.¹³⁵ Additional areas requiring improvement are the need for **increased offerings to Humanities researchers**¹³⁶ and the **need for more 'local' convening of business fellows** or of like-minded fellows.¹³⁷ Concerns have also been raised about **constraints on ability/time to participate in Development Network activities** (including caring responsibilities and inability to attend in-person events)¹³⁸ and the fact that **the general networking supported by the Network has not led to formal collaborations**.¹³⁹ Finally, some business fellows did not feel that the Development Network adequately aligned with their goals and felt that **the Network's offering reflected academic leanings**¹⁴⁰ (with the exception of Innovate UK networks which were reported by some to be more helpful than the FLF Development Network's offerings).¹⁴¹ Some fellows also felt there

¹²⁹ Int_02, 03, 08.

¹³⁰ Int_02.

¹³¹ Int_07.

¹³² Int_06, 08, 24.

¹³³ Int_10.

¹³⁴ Int_03.

¹³⁵ Int_08, 09.

¹³⁶ Int_04, 07.

¹³⁷ Int_12.

¹³⁸ Int_16, 17.

¹³⁹ Int_11.

¹⁴⁰ Int_19.

¹⁴¹ Int_22.

is scope for **additional training opportunities for business fellows**,¹⁴² and others suggested that perhaps **having too much choice makes it difficult to judge what is relevant**.¹⁴³

These findings are analysed and elaborated on in the case study below, which focuses on the FLF Development Network's Mentorship Programme.

¹⁴² Int_19.

¹⁴³ Int_23.

Box 2: Case Study: The FLF Development Network’s Mentorship Programme

3.4. Success factors of the FLF scheme

Case study: The FLF Development Network’s Mentorship Programme

This case study explores the evolution of the Development Network’s mentoring programme as a good practice example of the post-award support and development opportunities offered to fellows by the FLF scheme. The programme complements the Coaching programme under the Development Network, which offers task-oriented support. The mentoring programme, on the other hand, is experiential and provides personal guidance based on fellows’ needs. In response to feedback from fellows, the mentoring programme was designed to have four strands: one-to-one leadership mentoring, coffee connect, peer perspectives, and online self-learning. Since the launch of the mentoring programme in 2021, the project team has worked with experts to improve the offering, including making it more personalised and more suited for cross-disciplinary connections. The mentoring programme has been recognised as ‘pioneering’ by external stakeholders and is now providing a blueprint for other researcher mentoring programmes.

Developing the mentoring programme:

The project team originally worked with Cardiff University to establish the mentoring programme. During development, the team collected feedback from fellows about their mentoring needs. After six months, the team realised that the proposed programme was too traditional and sector-based, and the innovative mentoring that they wanted was unavailable from Cardiff University. Hence, the team decided to invite an expert from the University of Glasgow who has expertise in mentoring and coaching to design the programme structure. Based on expert consultation and feedback from fellows, the team developed the current four-strand design that incorporates peer-to-peer connections and highlights cross-disciplinary and value-led matching between the mentor and mentees. Fellows can be connected with mentors from different sectors such as media, business and policy to better support their career development needs. And through value-led matching, the team can align the experiential skills of the mentor with the needs of the fellow, making sure that personal context is taken into account.

Challenges in implementation:

One challenge the project team faced was finding the right expertise. It was difficult to identify people who shared the same aspirations for the programme, especially as they wanted to create a scheme beyond the kind of mentoring that UKRI had been offering. Another challenge was to stay responsive to the feedback from fellows. From designing the programme structure to implementing the four strands, the team has valued feedback and continued to evolve the programme to better reflect fellows’ needs. The team will soon update the programme structure to introduce ‘near-peer’ mentors, with fellows from earlier rounds who have benefitted from the mentoring programme returning to help new fellows and practice their mentoring skills.

Being recognised as a pioneering programme:

The programme is highly recognised by the mentoring community. In 2022, it won the Global Coaching, Mentoring, Supervision, and Team Coaching Award for Mentoring. The team now looks to engage with the sector and help other institutions establish their own mentoring programmes. For example, the team is supporting the Horizons Institute at the University of Leeds by sharing best practices. They will soon launch a mentoring toolkit to help institutions think about their objectives for mentoring and establish successful mentoring relationships according to their circumstances.

Key learnings:

- Continuous effort to improve the programme according to mentor and mentee’s feedback was key to its success.
- The mentoring programme encouraged people to step out of their sector, which aligns with the FLF project objective of fostering multidisciplinary research.

The first notable enabler in the implementation of the FLF scheme is **the long-term and flexible nature of the support and the certainty this provides**. Fellows report that this has provided a sense of job security and stability, with the four years plus three-year extension

(4+3 model) allowing for flexibility.¹⁴⁴ The provision of guaranteed long-term flexible support was a real strength, and combined with research autonomy has been a key draw to the scheme as it provides fellows with the ability to focus closely on their research, whilst concurrently having the opportunity to apply for other grants later on in the process.¹⁴⁵ One fellow reported that the FLF scheme has allowed her to create a team and deliver her long-term (10-year) plan,¹⁴⁶ and other fellows explained the attractiveness of the scheme's structure, stating that the four years the scheme provides is more generous than what other schemes would offer.¹⁴⁷ There are other opportunities with comparable lengths to FLF (Table 2), but Research Council-specific fellowships do tend to be shorter than four years. The length of the scheme is seen as ideal, as two years would not be sufficient to effect change as things in academia take time.¹⁴⁸ In addition to allowing academic fellows sufficient time to fully develop their careers and research, the 4+3 model has also given business fellows the opportunity to use the availability of long-term research funding to have more lasting impact within organisations, while at the same time providing the opportunity to focus on a discrete research topic, and the ability to pass up funding opportunities and business activities that have a short-term focus.¹⁴⁹ Significantly, the length of the scheme has provided fellows with the leeway and opportunity to take on more ambitious projects and be more experimental in their approaches, adding to the innovative value of scheme.¹⁵⁰

An additional enabler of the successful implementation of the scheme is its **open approach to funding research (and researchers) that other fellowship schemes do not necessarily fund**. This open approach to multi- and interdisciplinary research, involving researchers at varying stages of their careers as well as business-based researchers, has contributed to the uniqueness of the scheme and allowed it to capture a cohort of researchers that may not usually be eligible for fellowship schemes (as shown in Table 2).¹⁵¹ This open and curious method complements the generous length of the scheme in allowing the development of novel approaches with great potential for societal impact.¹⁵² As noted by one fellow, the fact that UKRI looks beyond the publication record of applicants to consider the wider picture opens up the FLF scheme to a broader range of applicants.¹⁵³

The third observable enabler of the FLF scheme involves **the resources made available for the scheme to provide post-award support**. The FLF scheme has funded the setting up of a dedicated UKRI post-award team in a manner that other comparable schemes have been unable to match.¹⁵⁴ In contrast to the FLF scheme, for example, EPSRC fellowships provide

¹⁴⁴ Int_05.

¹⁴⁵ Int_01, 24.

¹⁴⁶ Int_10.

¹⁴⁷ Int_09, 22.

¹⁴⁸ Int_09, 15, 16.

¹⁴⁹ Int_11.

¹⁵⁰ Int_22, 23.

¹⁵¹ Int_06, 13.

¹⁵² Int_09.

¹⁵³ Int_21.

¹⁵⁴ Int_22.

minimal post-award support without the element of relationship-building with the fellows.¹⁵⁵ Linked to this is **the spectrum of post-award support delivered through the Development Network and the focus on cohort building**, which can, in itself, be seen as an enabler and facilitator of the successful delivery of the FLF scheme. As has been previously alluded to, this high level of support, described by one fellow as ‘intense aftercare for the award’,¹⁵⁶ has been lauded for plugging gaps in university-based training,¹⁵⁷ providing networking opportunities¹⁵⁸ and the chance to develop leadership and team-building skills, whilst facilitating pause to self-reflect on research progress and on the research career.¹⁵⁹ Fellows reported feeling ‘spoiled for choice’¹⁶⁰ in this regard, and valued the opportunity to bond and make connections with fellow researchers that could last for the duration of their careers and beyond.¹⁶¹

The final notable enabler of the FLF scheme involves the way **the scheme has learned and adapted over time**. This ability to assess, reassess and go through several iterations in a flexible and fluid manner is seen as a critical success factor for the scheme. This has largely been due the FLF team’s independence and ability to evolve as the scheme has gone through different rounds, as demonstrated most clearly by changes made to better accommodate and address the concerns of business fellows across rounds 3 to 6.¹⁶² The FLF team has been lauded for being a people-driven team that executes the scheme in a non-static way, but with the scheme’s overall objectives always in mind.¹⁶³

Having described the successes of the FLF scheme above, in the following chapter we turn to the challenges that have arisen in the implementation of the scheme.

¹⁵⁵ Int_28.

¹⁵⁶ Int_07.

¹⁵⁷ Int_16.

¹⁵⁸ Int_01, 24.

¹⁵⁹ Int_06.

¹⁶⁰ Int_19.

¹⁶¹ Int_17.

¹⁶² Int_11.

¹⁶³ Int_11.

4. Evaluation of the FLF scheme's challenges (what can be improved upon)

This chapter focuses on the limitations of the implementation of the FLF scheme, drawing upon the same sources as the preceding chapter. The scheme is well run and has positively adapted over the rounds, and as such much of the following discussion focuses on challenges that have already been identified by UKRI for improvement, which in itself is a positive feature of FLF's management approach.

4.1. Challenges related to host organisations and demand management

UKRI has several requirements of host organisations and has put in place mechanisms to monitor that these are being adhered to. Firstly, UKRI is trying to encourage commitment from host institutions to offer permanent positions to fellows by the end of their fellowships.¹⁶⁴ In addition, scheme documents mandate the need for host commitment to the progression of fellows to open-ended contracts,¹⁶⁵ and sets out expectations for host organisations around the provision of appropriate working environments for fellows.¹⁶⁶ Scheme documents note that in instances where the host institutions are not providing appropriate and adequate support and progression opportunities, these institutions may not be awarded further fellowships in the future.¹⁶⁷ UKRI has put in place specific assessment criteria relevant to host institution support to fellows' programmes of work, including upholding the dedicated time commitment needed for research activities and enabling and supporting the fellows in maximising the social/economic impact of their work.¹⁶⁸ However, UKRI recognises the limits of its influence on hosts to ensure they provide the necessary support¹⁶⁹ and has acknowledged its reliance on fellows for information on the extent to which the host is meeting its commitments. Increasing effort has also been made to collect more data on host support to fellows.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁴ Int_25_Programme-level.

¹⁶⁵ UKRI Future Leaders Fellowships – Frequently Asked Questions, 2020.

¹⁶⁶ UKRI Future Leaders Fellowships – Overview of the Scheme.

¹⁶⁷ UKRI Future Leaders Fellowships – Overview of the Scheme.

¹⁶⁸ UKRI FLF Assessment Criteria.

¹⁶⁹ Int_28_Programme-level.

¹⁷⁰ Int_28_Programme-level.

4.1.1. Host organisation support of fellows

Evidence on how well supported (or not) fellows have been by their hosts is mixed.

Examples highlighting where fellows have felt supported by hosts include instances where the host has reduced teaching responsibilities and opened up other learning opportunities;¹⁷¹ where the host has supported career progression and relocation of researchers;¹⁷² and instances of host mentorship, training and provision of administrative as well as financial support.¹⁷³ In some instances, the host institution has funded PhD students to support the fellow, allowing them to reach their research goals.¹⁷⁴ Business hosts have also been supportive to fellows. Examples of this include instances where the host has given space for research, and provided administrative support and additional networking and mentorship opportunities to the fellow.¹⁷⁵

However, **there was evidence from around a quarter of those interviewed that some fellows have not felt supported by hosts** and have faced issues in this respect. One area where there has been a reported lack of support involves excessive and burdensome teaching requirements¹⁷⁶ and the related lack of adequate protected time for research.¹⁷⁷ Fellows have also reported being burdened by too many administrative tasks, detracting from research in terms of time and focus.¹⁷⁸ This applied to both academic and business fellows, with some business fellows reporting additional administrative duties required of them by the host in exchange for the level of support received.¹⁷⁹ A final category of challenges faced by fellows has to do with accessing necessary resources within the organisation, with one fellow reporting some resistance and a lack of understanding of the type of support needed within university departments.¹⁸⁰

4.1.2. Host organisation impact

There is some evidence highlighting the manner and extent to which the FLF scheme has had an impact on host organisations' processes, values and activities.

In both business and academic settings, host institutions have reported putting in place processes aimed at providing more support to researchers and more guidance to applicants in light of successful FLF applications.¹⁸¹ The fellowship has also 'opened doors' within host institutions, including new leadership positions,¹⁸² and has been linked with the generation of new

¹⁷¹ Int_01_Fellow_R1_Academic.

¹⁷² Int_05_Fellow_R2_Academic.

¹⁷³ Int_08_Fellow_R3_Academic, Int_11_Fellow_R3_Business.

¹⁷⁴ Int_06_Fellow_R2_Academic.

¹⁷⁵ Int_10_Fellow_R3_Business, Int_22_Fellow_R6_Business.

¹⁷⁶ Int_03_Fellow_R1_Academic, Int_24_Fellow_R2_Academic.

¹⁷⁷ Int_16_Fellow_R5_Academic.

¹⁷⁸ Int_12_Fellow_R4_Academic.

¹⁷⁹ Int_14_Fellow_R4_Business.

¹⁸⁰ Int_20_Fellow_R6_Academic.

¹⁸¹ Int_01_Fellow_R1_Academic, Int_03_Fellow_R1_Academic.

¹⁸² Int_07_Fellow_R2_Academic.

awareness of fellowship and funding opportunities within business hosts,¹⁸³ and to increasing interest in early-career opportunities within universities.¹⁸⁴ Furthermore, the FLF scheme has empowered fellows to develop teams and build longer-term visions for their research within their host organisations, and it has encouraged business hosts to commit long-term resources to specific strategic research areas.¹⁸⁵ Finally, the fellowship has been linked to changes in business human resources (HR) processes and other minor administrative changes to meet scheme requirements, though these appeared to be specific in response to the requirements of the FLF scheme.¹⁸⁶

Barriers/challenges

In addition to these enablers, the FLF has faced several challenges that have acted as barriers to its successful implementation. The first set of barriers involves host institutions, both directly and indirectly. Firstly, some **fellows have reported noticing a difference between the FLF scheme and host institution understanding of the scheme's processes and requirements**, and consider this to be an impediment to the scheme's success. Some fellows did not feel adequately supported by their host institution in some instances due to lack of understanding of and adherence to UKRI expectations. This is evidenced by the lack of adequate support to some fellows in terms of time allocated for research, the provision of suitable working environments and the commitment to support opportunities to generate research impact.¹⁸⁷ Linked with this are the **perceived barriers to changing institutions**, which has led some fellows to assume that there is a lot of paperwork involved in switching institutions and that the onus is on them to make a strong case as to why the current institution has failed them.¹⁸⁸

Overall, **the lack of consistency and variability in host institution support to fellows** has been noted as a key barrier to the scheme's success. This variability is seen not only across different institutions but also within departments in the same institution as well. Fellows have described how the FLF is implemented in different ways by different departments, and how the level of autonomy and support fellows receive varies in each department.¹⁸⁹ This is a particularly important barrier to address as host institutions are pivotal to the success of applicants,¹⁹⁰ and consequently the FLF scheme as a whole. A further barrier to successful implementation linked to host institutions has to do with the **potential tension between the research focus of the fellowship and teaching requirements linked to promotion/career progression**. Activities such as teaching, academic administrative duties and leadership are linked to fellows' career progression. Although this can potentially be mitigated through salary tapering, it creates a complex and difficult to resolve tension between the need to focus on

¹⁸³ Int_10_Fellow_R3_Business.

¹⁸⁴ Int_20_Fellow_R6_Academic.

¹⁸⁵ Int_18_Fellow_R5_Business.

¹⁸⁶ Int_14_Fellow_R4_Business.

¹⁸⁷ Int_24_Fellow_R2_Academic.

¹⁸⁸ Int_09_Fellow_R3_Academic.

¹⁸⁹ Int_24_Fellow_R2_Academic.

¹⁹⁰ Int_10_Fellow_R3_Business.

research as per the requirements of the FLF scheme, and the need to demonstrate non-research skills and capacity to secure a promotion in the host institution.¹⁹¹

Demand management approaches used by universities

This section presents evidence on the demand management approaches taken by universities and the challenges encountered in related processes, and provides a more in-depth analysis of the demand management process through a case study.

In response to the high level of interest in the FLF scheme, universities seeking to host FLF fellows put in place a series of measures to plan for and manage the demand for the scheme (demand management) and to cap the number of applications, at the behest of the UKRI. As explained by one host institution representative, demand management was put in place for round 7 as they struggled to process the over 800 applications they received in round 6 in the allocated time.¹⁹² Demand management was also put in place to help ensure diversity and inclusion, with host institutions required by UKRI to provide an inclusivity statement explaining the processes taken to ensure that diversity was considered and inform best practice in this area.¹⁹³ Finally, the pre-sifting of candidates was driven by the fact that university host institutions have to commit to open-ended contracts for successful candidates.¹⁹⁴ This consideration has led universities to sift for candidates who, as one host institution put it, ‘show that they have more to offer above and beyond the kind of traditional training needs’.¹⁹⁵

Host demand management measures typically consisted of an initial internal sift of fellows involving eligibility assessments, written applications, the provision of information sessions, training sessions and workshops about the scheme, and, for those who progressed through this internal sift, the conducting of mock interviews to prepare applicants for the FLF review process.¹⁹⁶ One FLF fellow described how their introduction to the scheme was initiated by the university grant officer who identified them as candidate with potential for grant capture based on their publication record and as suitable to the FLF scheme based on the interdisciplinary nature of their research.¹⁹⁷ Some fellows found this demand management process to be a positive and helpful experience. For example, one reported how their university’s research development team invested time in supporting them through the application process, providing feedback and guidance that they felt ultimately led to a successful application.¹⁹⁸

However, evidence suggests that there have been some problematic aspects to university-led demand management processes. The main concern has to do with the perceived discrepancies between university guidance and what fellows believed UKRI intended for the scheme. There is also an evident lack of uniformity and consistency across host universities’

¹⁹¹ Int_02_Fellow_R1_Academic, Int_07_Fellow_R2_Academic.

¹⁹² Int_27_Programme-level.

¹⁹³ Int_27_Programme-level.

¹⁹⁴ UKRI Future Leaders Fellowships - Frequently Asked Questions, 2020.

¹⁹⁵ Int_27_Programme-level.

¹⁹⁶ Int_03_Fellow_R1_Academic, Int_02_Fellow_R1_Academic, Int_06_Fellow_R2_Academic, Int_16_Fellow_R5_Academic.

¹⁹⁷ Int_12_Fellow_R4_Academic.

¹⁹⁸ Int_21_Fellow_R6_Academic.

approaches, as the experiences of the fellows in this regard are variable. One fellow remarked how the host institution was 'very poorly prepared to support an FLF application' and described how the university 'gave wrong advice at many points' and how the mock interview process was 'intimidating' to the point where the fellow almost withdrew their application.¹⁹⁹ Another fellow had a similar experience, stating that the institution did not have an adequate understanding of UKRI, and there was not enough awareness of what the fellowship entails and what the requirements are, particularly at the departmental level.²⁰⁰ While fellows recognised the scheme's goal to be inclusive, some felt that the demand management process curtailed this by being heavily restrictive, and in some instances prioritising applicants who did not have a permanent position²⁰¹ whilst in other cases restricting applications to fellows who already held such a position.²⁰² This reflects the challenges faced by host institutions in reconciling previously mentioned mandatory requirements such as the need to commit to the progression of fellows to open-ended contracts and expectations around the provision of appropriate working environments for fellows, as well as the scheme's inclusivity goals.

These findings are further analysed and elaborated on in the case study described in Box 3 below.

Box 3: Case study: Demand Management

Case study: Demand Management

This case study explores the 'demand management' implemented in the FLF scheme for round 7. In response to the high number of applications, UKRI has taken several steps to manage demand. Prior to round 7, for example, UKRI established caps on the number of applications that certain large universities could submit. The aim of these demand management measures is to reduce the burden on UKRI, the Research Councils and the broader peer-review community and to improve the success rate of FLF applications. However, such measures also raise a number of questions, including the additional burden on universities to conduct review processes and whether university-based processes can adequately ensure the diversity of applications. This case study explores how FLF has sought to manage demand and highlights some of the implications for hosts and fellows.

Developing demand management:

A characteristic of the FLF scheme is that host organisations are required to commit to a higher level of involvement, including an open-ended contract and greater support for the awardees compared to other conventional funding schemes. This means only a small number of applicants can be supported in practice. In earlier rounds, some universities had already been conducting internal sifts of FLF applications for their own purposes. UKRI also wrote to larger universities (i.e. those anticipated to submit a large number of applications) encouraging them to engage in internal review and selection processes to limit the number of submitted applications. However, at round 6, the number of applicants increased far beyond UKRI's managing capacity. This added significant pressure to the peer-review process and caused round 6 to be extended by a year. Hence, in response to the high number of applicants anticipated for round 7, the project team proposed a cap on the number of applicants universities can submit and asked universities to conduct internal sifts. After deliberation, the team decided to determine the caps based primarily on the research population at research organisations. Given that the FLF is a flagship

¹⁹⁹ Int_09_Fellow_R3_Academic.

²⁰⁰ Int_20_Fellow_R6_Academic.

²⁰¹ Int_06_Fellow_R2_Academic.

²⁰² Int_24_Fellow_R2_Academic.

scheme, and the impact of demand management could be controversial, the project team had to get approval from the senior level of UKRI.

What was good:

Demand management effectively reduced the number of applicants, which allowed the FLF scheme to be more sustainable. To ensure that the demand management does not introduce prejudice in applications, UKRI provided guidance on conducting reviews, with the aim of ensuring EDI, and asked research organisations to submit information on their processes. Feedback from research organisations indicates that many of them had not considered diversity before, and the requirements from UKRI encouraged them to reflect on EDI and their selection process. Applicant data for round 7 reveals that the introduction of demand management did not have a significant impact on the diversity of applicants.

Challenges:

While the project team proposed the introduction of demand management for round 6, it did not get approval because the senior level within UKRI had concerns over the impact on EDI. The extended round 6 gave the team enough time to address these concerns and provide reassurance regarding EDI, and combined with a personnel change within UKRI this meant that the use of demand management was signed off before round 7 started. In addition, research organisations also had reservations about demand management, arguing that the internal sift panels essentially transfer the burden from UKRI to them, as the panellists who participate in institutional panels are the same people who would have sat in the UKRI-level panels. Some universities also report that it has been difficult for them to select candidates because they were not sure how a researcher they thought was strong would fare against UKRI's criteria.

Key learnings:

- Introducing demand management effectively reduced the time frame and workload for UKRI, and therefore made the FLF scheme more sustainable.
- Guidance and requirements on EDI for research organisations are crucial to ensure demand management does not increase inequality, and they have even provoked research organisations to reflect on their selection process. Round 7 data indicates that demand management did not reduce the diversity of the pool of applicants.
- Some research organisations reported that having to host internal sifts has put pressure on their capacity. They also said that it is difficult to select candidates, especially when they have to make a decision between two researchers from very different disciplines.

4.2. Challenges related to accommodating business fellows

Findings from interviews and call guidance documents show an increasing flexibility and adaptability from UKRI aimed at further supporting business applications with each passing round. This has included flexibility in timelines for project delivery,²⁰³ and flexibility in structuring the proposal and in the different cost categories used for business applicants.²⁰⁴ These adaptations were found to be beneficial and were lauded by business applicants with, for example, one person describing the application process as being ‘not overly prescriptive’ as they were able to structure the eight-page case for support in the way they saw fit, placing emphasis on the areas they were seeking to highlight, and adding to the overall uniqueness of the FLF scheme.²⁰⁵ The introduction of webinars for business-hosted applications in round 5 was seen as particularly helpful to applicants without an academic background who were not as well-versed in how the grant application process worked. During these webinars business-based applicants were taken through all aspects of the application process and given

²⁰³ Int_10_Fellow_R3_Business.

²⁰⁴ Int_19_Fellow_R5_Business.

²⁰⁵ Int_19_Fellow_R5_Business.

explanations of what needed to be done and by when, in a communication style that was consistent with common industry practices.²⁰⁶ In addition to these specific measures, the FLF Board has been discussing options for restructuring the interview panel process to better integrate business proposals,²⁰⁷ with further steps being taken to better engage with charity and public sector organisations through discussion of the approval in principle of the eligibility of registered and incorporated charitable organisations and of public bodies to act as a host for an FLF fellow.²⁰⁸

Evidence of the challenges in engaging business

The call process has faced several distinct challenges in engaging businesses and industry. **These challenges have broadly been specific to the companies' size and sector, with further challenges relating to the nature of the calls' guidelines and the perceptions and experiences of business-based applicants regarding the role of academia in the process.**

In terms of **challenges related to the features and characteristics of companies**, evidence has shown that smaller companies are less likely to be aware of the FLF scheme, and that their business environment is such that there is unlikely to be an individual whose role is to spot opportunities such as the FLF scheme.²⁰⁹ Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) have been described as being at a distinct disadvantage due to the scheme's financial contribution requirements, since smaller companies are usually more financially constrained than larger companies.²¹⁰ Prospective fellows hoping to be based at smaller companies have also reported facing administrative challenges including obstacles in acquiring proof of funding and in ensuring that the legal status of the company was appropriate to the scheme; the process is cumbersome as applicants struggle to attain all the relevant documentation in a small company setting.²¹¹ The sector or industry of the companies was an additional consideration in call process-related challenges. Here, evidence suggests that the level of awareness of the scheme in niche industries has been low. In the fields of plant genomics²¹² and archaeology,²¹³ for example, FLF communication channels were seen to be inadequate as the awareness of the scheme was extremely limited relative to more ubiquitous disciplines. This resulted in some fellows describing the call as 'obscure', bringing into question the call's inclusivity 'in terms of fields and in general to industry',²¹⁴ (although overall visibility of the scheme the outside academia is seen as relatively low).²¹⁵

Further **challenges in engaging business involve the nature of the call's guidelines**, which some industry applicants found difficult to understand. More significantly, applicants in earlier rounds found that there was inadequate support, with a lack of guidance and clarity on

²⁰⁶ Int_19_Fellow_R5_Business.

²⁰⁷ FLF Project Board Minutes – July 2021.

²⁰⁸ FLF Project Board Minutes – March 2022.

²⁰⁹ Int_10_Fellow_R3_Business.

²¹⁰ Int_14_Fellow_R4_Business.

²¹¹ Int_14_Fellow_R4_Business.

²¹² Int_14_Fellow_R4_Business.

²¹³ Int_23_Fellow_R6_Business.

²¹⁴ Int_14_Fellow_R4_Business.

²¹⁵ Int_19_Fellow_R5_Business.

questions such as data storage rules and mandates.²¹⁶ This is directly related to the call's guidelines being tailored more to academia than to industry,²¹⁷ resulting in grey areas such as not being quite sure where national laboratories fall in terms of their finance aspects.²¹⁸ The general experience and perception has been that some form of link to academia is a key determinant of FLF scheme application success. This is because business applicants who had pre-existing links with academic institutions were more likely to have known about the scheme compared to those who did not, due to access to the academic communication channels through which awareness of the scheme is typically disseminated.²¹⁹ As one business fellows observed, 'we're a small company... there is no way anyone in my company would have flagged it (the FLF Scheme)... it's relied on me being plugged into that landscape already.'²²⁰ More significantly, applicants with pre-existing links to academia saw themselves as being at an advantage throughout the application process due to having access to university resources in terms of a supportive network²²¹ and being able to more easily understand and meet the requirements of the call's application processes.²²² Finally, there is evidence that applicants relied on their own connections and initiative to make links across academia and industry, with, for example, academic applicants wishing to engage with business having to be proactive and inventive in identifying potential industry partners as there were no effective linkages through the university.²²³

Positive takeaways

Despite these challenges, there were numerous positive takeaways related to engagement with business. Firstly, UKRI's approach to business outreach has evolved throughout the lifecycle of the scheme. As noted by one fellow, there has been a marked difference between the way the scheme started out and the way that UKRI has made changes to accommodate more industry applications (e.g. workshops to explain the FLF application process to business applicants) and the FLF team has been lauded for being agile and responsible, which is a marked difference to other funding mechanisms.²²⁴ There have been notable changes in the level of support and encouragement given to industry players to apply,²²⁵ and there has also been a marked increase in engagement and in the level of interaction between business and academia across the rounds,²²⁶ and an increase in academia-business fluidity as the scheme's call processes have facilitated movement from one setting to another, providing different opportunities to applicants.

Evidence on challenges in supporting business applications

²¹⁶ Int_14_Fellow_R4_Business.

²¹⁷ Int_13_Fellow_R4_Academic.

²¹⁸ Int_13_Fellow_R4_Academic.

²¹⁹ Int_15_Fellow_R4_Business, Int_18_Fellow_R5_Business, Int_22_Fellow_R6_Business.

²²⁰ Int_15_Fellow_R4_Business.

²²¹ Int_23_Fellow_R6_Business.

²²² Int_14_Fellow_R4_Business.

²²³ Int_22_Fellow_R6_Business.

²²⁴ Int_11_Fellow_R3_Business.

²²⁵ Int_11_Fellow_R3_Business.

²²⁶ Int_26_Programme-level.

The introduction of business applications in round 3 has faced several challenges. **These have included concerns over time and timing, funding and the overall adaptability of the application process to suit business applications.** The key concern raised by business applicants involves the lengthy timelines in the application process in terms of both the time it takes to complete proposals, with one applicant in round 3 expressing frustration at having to provide 17 documents (letters of support, etc.) as part of the application, which took too much time for a business environment,²²⁷ and of the time it takes for applications to be processed. Lengthy timelines have been attributed to traditional academic review processes with a lot of stages, with some applicants reporting 6–9 months or even a year from application to answer,²²⁸ undoubtedly exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic during some rounds. Such lengthy time scales are particularly problematic for smaller businesses who are reliant on being awarded funding for a major project to facilitate their operations.²²⁹ Furthermore, as with the call processes, business applicants without an academic background found the application process particularly challenging given the inadequate levels of support for business applicants.²³⁰ It has been a struggle to pigeonhole businesses into a system that is focused on academia,²³¹ but the guidance systems are evolving.

Challenges faced in reviewing business applications

There have been several challenges in the reviewing of business applications within the FLF scheme. As has been previously alluded to, **the amount of time it took to receive feedback was not ideal for business applicants.** As explained by one fellow whose application took 15–18 months from first expressing interest to post-interview feedback without a decision, these timelines are challenging in a business environment as things change quickly and the scope of the research could change in the interim.²³² Another business applicant expressing similar concerns applied in March 2019 but their award only started in August 2020, which they described 'less than ideal' in a business environment,²³³ and yet another, who waited 9 months before hearing back, expressed feeling concerns at the time about having missed the opportunity in the gap they had seen in their research area.²³⁴ **While the interview panel experience was overall positive for business applicants, some felt there could have been a better industry-academia balance,** with one applicant observing that it felt like an academic programme trying to be inclusive, as opposed to an industry programme.²³⁵ A significant gap in the interview panel was the lack of business people from non-profit organisations, which some applicants felt was a key requirement for their proposed research area.²³⁶ Finally, some applicants without an academic background or post-graduate degree

²²⁷ Int_10_Fellow_R3_Business.

²²⁸ Int_26_Programme-level.

²²⁹ Int_26_Programme-level.

²³⁰ Int_15_Fellow_R4_Business.

²³¹ Int_27_Programme-level.

²³² Int_10_Fellow_R3_Business.

²³³ Int_11_Fellow_R3_Business.

²³⁴ Int_16_Fellow_R5_Academic.

²³⁵ Int_15_Fellow_R4_Business.

²³⁶ Int_18_Fellow_R5_Business.

found the peer review process to be daunting,²³⁷ whilst other industry applicants found that having an established relationship with academia to be key in navigating the peer review process.²³⁸

Despite these challenges several business fellows found the combination of academic rigour and industry experience in the interview panel to be ideal,²³⁹ with evidence of predominantly industry panels in round 6.²⁴⁰ This reflects the efforts made by UKRI to iteratively adapt the scheme to suit business applicants. It was acknowledged that the time scales were not suitable for businesses and steps, such as the use of more than one assessor per application, were introduced to expedite the process. Measures were also taken to ensure an appropriate mix of business-academic panellists, including taking a case by case approach to assigning reviewers.²⁴¹ Finally, the need to improve the quality of reviews received for business-based proposals after round 3 was acknowledged by the FLF Board, who noted that while the reviews received in round 3 were adequate, these could be improved in future rounds through trialling use of the Innovate UK reviewer pool, noting that these reviewers would be familiar with innovative and collaborative proposals.²⁴²

Barriers

Barriers have also been observed in relation to business applicants. In addition to the previously noted concerns around the timelines of the FLF review processes, the overall **duration of the fellowship could be a barrier for business.** Some business applicants might want to do a shorter fellowship since, unlike in academia, four years is a long time in industry.²⁴³ A further business-related barrier involves **legal issues relating to funding and competition regulation**, with some industry fellows reporting that they had to hire a lawyer to help them navigate competition rules and other relevant legal considerations, which felt like a barrier to get through.²⁴⁴ An additional barrier has been the **limited accessibility of the application process to certain types of applicants**, in particular to smaller business-based and international applicants. The lack of adequate arrangements in terms of outreach/visibility and support of applicants from non-profit organisations was noted by applicants who felt they did not fit squarely in either the academic or business categories.²⁴⁵

The scheme has faced general barriers to its successful implementation including the **continued academic leaning of the scheme (despite changes that have been introduced to make it more suitable to business fellows).** Business fellows in the most recently analysed round 6 are still contending that more needs to be done to shift away from the predominantly academic focus of the scheme in the call language and processes (e.g. the use

²³⁷ Int_11_Fellow_R3_Business.

²³⁸ Int_11_Fellow_R3_Business.

²³⁹ Int_11_Fellow_R3_Business.

²⁴⁰ Int_22_Fellow_R6_Business.

²⁴¹ Int_26_Programme-level.

²⁴² FLF Project Board Minutes – January 2020.

²⁴³ Int_10_Fellow_R3_Business.

²⁴⁴ Int_18_Fellow_R5_Business.

²⁴⁵ Int_18_Fellow_R5_Business.

of Je-S).²⁴⁶ When pressed for examples, those citing this issue (two fellows) could not point to anything specific, perhaps indicating that there has been a process of getting used to UKRI calls as opposed to Innovate UK and RAEng-specific calls which are more focused on attracting business applicants. Further barriers highlighted by fellows have to do with the **limited exposure/visibility of the fellows**, with some stating that UKRI should promote them more by, for example, introducing and advertising them on their website, similarly to other fellowships such as the ERC and URF.²⁴⁷ Some business fellows felt they were 'hidden deep within the UKRI website'.²⁴⁸ An additional general barrier involves the **restrictions on what FLF funds can be spent on**. For example, FLF funds cannot be spent on funding PhD students who would be able to provide longer-term research support than postdoctoral researchers would.²⁴⁹ Other examples of similar funding restrictions include that computing cannot be part of the FLF application because it is expected that the host will provide it, as well as the restriction in discretionary funding for travel or student projects.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁶ Int_15_Fellow_R4_Business.

²⁴⁷ Int_02_Fellow_R1_Academic, Int_03_Fellow_R1_Academic.

²⁴⁸ Int_14_Fellow_R4_Business.

²⁴⁹ Int_20_Fellow_R6_Academic.

²⁵⁰ Int_17_Fellow_R5_Academic.

5. Conclusions

Our headline conclusion is that the FLF scheme is a unique and well-delivered scheme that has evolved and changed positively over its six funding rounds in response to applicant and fellow feedback. The scheme offers a unique opportunity for future R&I academic and business leaders to pursue their research agenda within a secure funding framework that offers intellectual freedom and post-award support. There has been significant effort on the part of UKRI to improve the scheme, including its expansion to business fellows, wider reach and increased access to the scheme from an EDI perspective.

Minor issues were raised around the accessibility of the scheme to business fellows, demand management and host organisation support levels, and the specificity of the FLF Development Network. These issues did not have any significant negative effects on applicants or their projects, and UKRI has acted to ameliorate and/or resolve them as they have arisen. Table 6 presents short summary conclusions of our findings against each evaluation question.

Table 6: Process evaluation questions – conclusions

Evaluation question	Summary conclusion
To what extent have the FLF applicant, awardee and financial targets been met?	The FLF is a popular scheme, receiving many more applications than can be funded per round. The demographic and geographical characteristics of the over 500 fellowships awarded to date largely reflect those of UKRI's total funding profile. Significant efforts have been made by UKRI to increase the diversity of applicants and awardees in terms of gender, e.g. via positive action introduced in the round 6 interview stage; these have shown promising results.
To what extent and how have FLF processes supported multidisciplinary in the fellowship scheme?	FLF has encouraged multidisciplinary in applications through flexible and open eligibility criteria. Applicants felt unrestricted in proposing research topics they considered 'unconventional' and felt their cross-disciplinary work was well accommodated by FLF reviewers. FLF disciplinary areas (using Council affiliation as a proxy) largely reflect proportions at the UKRI level, with most fellows from STEM subject areas. Though most fellows felt that the scheme was able to reach a diverse set of disciplines, some from the arts and humanities felt the call guidance was too STEM-focused.
To what extent is the premise of the FLF scheme unique in the sector?	The FLF is a unique fellowship offer in the UK funding landscape. Elements like its cross-disciplinary approach, host support requirement and academia/business inclusion are not uncommon features of other schemes, but none packages them all together into one scheme, as the FLF does. Fellows and hosts felt the scheme was uniquely flexible and inclusive as regards its open-ended nature, balance between scientific quality and leadership development, and cross-UKRI discipline coverage. This openness, though rated positively, did lead to demand management issues for UKRI and hosts, in some cases.

Evaluation of the Future Leaders Fellowships scheme

Evaluation question	Summary conclusion
<p>To what extent has FLF delivered effective post-award management to support the professional development of the fellows?</p>	<p>Post-award management, delivery and quality was considered effective, proportional and flexible by fellows. The support package was the most comprehensive compared to comparator schemes. The award-winning FLF Development Network programmes (mentoring and coaching) have been well received by fellows, who can adapt their offerings to their own development needs. Some felt that the support did not enable enough formal connections with other researchers, policy makers or the media, and was too academically focused for some business fellows.</p>
<p>What, in practice, is felt to be working more/less well regarding the delivery of the FLF?</p>	<p>The long-term and flexible nature of the fellowships (e.g. 4+3 model) gives fellows and hosts a certainty that allows them to focus on their research and development goals. The iterative improvement and reflexivity within the FLF's delivery by UKRI is clear with the positive changes made over the years (e.g. inclusion of businesses in round 3). Issues in delivery, which have been and continue to be addressed by UKRI, are focused on the engagement of business applicants (e.g. language of call guidance, smaller businesses found it more difficult to navigate applications).</p>
<p>What are the unexpected barriers or facilitators to FLF processes and the delivery of the anticipated outcomes, if any?</p>	<p>Demand management was to be expected in such a cross-UKRI flagship scheme. Steps to manage this have been taken by UKRI in recent rounds (e.g. caps on institutions). However, the demand management within academic institutions (e.g. sifting who can apply to FLF) may limit the inclusivity that the FLF offers (e.g. only promoting those with high publication rates). In addition, UKRI cannot control the level of support provided by hosts, besides providing guidance to hosts and acting on instances where fellows report issues, for which evidence is apparent (e.g. overloading fellows with teaching responsibilities).</p>
<p>What lessons are there for future rounds/similar schemes?</p>	<p>Lessons for future schemes are discussed in the next chapter as recommendations.</p>

The final chapter of this report offers recommendations to UKRI on what can be learned from the above findings that might be applied to future FLF rounds as well as other such schemes.

6. Recommendations

In discussing findings relating to each process evaluation theme, the preceding chapters have also offered suggestions for how FLF processes can be improved. In this chapter, we draw upon this evidence to present five cross-cutting recommendations. These are future-oriented and intended to provide insight into lessons learnt for future rounds of the FLF and for similar schemes. The intended audience is therefore decision makers within UKRI who may be involved in the further development of FLF processes moving forward. The recommendations may also be of relevance to stakeholders in wider R&I funding schemes seeking to learn from the FLF scheme's experience.

1. Continue to operate a flexible and open scheme with an ongoing focus on EDI

A key benefit and differentiator of the FLF scheme has been its open and flexible nature both in terms of its multidisciplinary and in accommodating both academic and business fellows. UKRI has also worked to ensure the scheme is as inclusive as it can be to applicants from different backgrounds, for example with positive action at the interview stage. We recommend that UKRI continues to measure and improve these aspects to further close the gaps that are evident in the proportion of fellows from underrepresented backgrounds. Work on this is ongoing via positive action and monitoring at the host level of how applicants were sifted in rounds 7 and 8. Resulting data on this compared to UKRI averages should be analysed, and if possible, published alongside the data currently published per round on EDI.

2. Have a more local and regional focus to FLF call processes to increase the diversity and quality of future FLF cohorts

Findings from interviews with both business and academic fellows as well as host institutions indicate an appetite for a more a local or regional approach to FLF call processes. Smaller business hosts believe that this approach would increase the visibility of the scheme to SMEs, particularly those in niche industries and those in the non-profit sector who are based outside larger cities due to cost considerations. An additional benefit of putting in place initiatives to increase the visibility of the scheme at local and regional levels is that it would attract potential FLF applicants who are not based in Russell Group university hubs, thereby potentially increasing the quality, geographic reach and diversity of future FLF cohorts. This could be done via means UKRI already uses. Some UKRI funding schemes (e.g. the Strength in Places Fund) ran a series of regional information sessions across the UK to publicise the scheme and promote engagement and applications from non-traditional applicants. This could be a useful model for FLF. However, in theory online sessions can be made open to all applicants. More critical will be to tap into local networks to raise awareness and encourage non-traditional applicants to join; these might be local enterprise leads in large, combined authorities, the Local Government Association and SME collectives.

3. Build on the successes of the demand management processes put in place at UKRI level and encourage best practices in managing applicant numbers at institutional level

More non-fellow dependent monitoring of host institutions is needed to ensure that hosts are adhering to the FLF's guidance on the required level of support to fellows. There is a need for more education of host institutions to help them better understand the scheme and better align with the FLF's values. We are aware that monitoring exists around how hosts sift applicants and that there are caps for applicants from certain universities. This is a positive step towards increasing the diversity of applicants from a wider set of underrepresented institutions. To further aid this, specific guidance could be developed and issued to universities covering how they might run internal pre-application sifts, specifically for FLF. This might consist of, for example, running 'train the trainer' sessions on FLF principles for university leads to ensure alignment. Such work has so far been variable across institutions, which could lead to a stronger pre-selection of talent than desired by UKRI, while also potentially having diversity implications. UKRI should develop stronger guidelines on the characteristics of internal sifts it believes leads to the most equitable and high-quality results in terms of applicants; for example, it could publish a weighting of assessment criteria, or be clearer about EDI target expectations and strategies for institutions.

4. Continue to engage and support business applicants

UKRI has worked to better engage business applicants and awardees since their inclusion in round 3 via inclusive call documentation and the widening of post-award development support to industry-focused fellows. However, the FLF Board has expressed some concerns around the quality of business applicants throughout rounds 3 to 6. Concurrently, findings from interviews with business fellows show that those without access to academic networks are less likely to know about the scheme. Both these concerns can be addressed by UKRI continuing to engage with business applicants and fellows, including through, for example, advertising events and initiatives on social media channels such as Twitter and LinkedIn, and by publicising the scheme at regional universities. Another action in this vein would be to advertise via business associations such as the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry (ABPI), Confederation of British Industry (CBI) and Be the Business, and leverage the networks associated with other UKRI funds (e.g. ESRC's productivity institute's regional productivity fora, Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund challenges).

5. Continue to monitor and develop ways to support business fellows and applicants

Going forward, it will be vital and necessary for the UKRI to consider what the best way to support FLF business fellows is. Our findings have revealed the pivotal role played by Innovate UK in various processes related to supporting business FLF fellows. Findings on post-award support and monitoring showed how the FLF scheme's post-award due diligence processes were largely developed by drawing from Innovate UK's experience and expertise, which informed the FLF's due diligence checks for business hosts from rounds 3 through 6. Moreover, Innovate UK partnered with UKRI Research Councils to support the delivery of peer review for the FLF by helping to select reviewers of multi- and interdisciplinary proposals. Innovate UK's role was also seen in instances where business fellows reported that Innovate UK networks (e.g. Scaling the Edge) were more aligned to their goals than the FLF Development Network's offerings, which are seen to have a more academic focus. We therefore recommend that the UKRI leverage this cooperation with Innovate UK even further

to help tailor the processes related to business applicants in future rounds, and perhaps consider the development of a separate parallel FLF strand for business fellows run entirely by Innovate UK. Such a bold and robust pivot to FLF processes could potentially be more impactful than trying to 'fit a square peg in a round hole' through disparate, ad hoc modifications to various FLF processes to accommodate business fellows, and would maintain the integrity of the scheme in relation to what is already working well for academic fellows.

This concludes the FLF process evaluation. The impact evaluation of FLF will report in 2024.

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Annex A. Framework and question revision

Table 7: Process framework

ToC process themes	Evaluation question	Metric	Proposed data sources	Kirkpatrick level
Performance	To what extent have the FLF applicant, awardee and financial targets been met?	Number of applicants against target	Management information analysis	
		Number of fellows awarded against target broken down by sector, discipline, geography and nationality	Management information analysis	
		Amount of funding provided to fellows/hosts against target broken down by sector, discipline and geography	Management information analysis	
Diversity	To what extent and how have FLF processes supported multidisciplinary in the fellowship scheme?	Inclusiveness and flexibility of the application criteria	Document review; key informant interviews	
		Transparency and design of the programme and award criteria	Document review; key informant interviews	
		Diversity make-up of funding panel/award panel	Document review; key informant interviews	
		Comprehensiveness of channels used for communicating scheme/pre-launch engagement, etc.	Document review; key informant interview	
		Number of fellows awarded against target broken down by sector, discipline, geography and nationality	Management information analysis	
		Amount of funding provided to fellows/hosts against target broken down by sector, discipline and geography	Management information analysis	
Value	To what extent is the premise of the FLF scheme	Nature of interactions and support given to hosts (e.g. certainty created by funds)	Key informant interviews; document review	1-Reaction

Evaluation of the Future Leaders Fellowships scheme

ToC process themes	Evaluation question	Metric	Proposed data sources	Kirkpatrick level
	unique in the sector?	Nature of interactions and support provided by hosts to fellows	Key informant interviews; document review	1-Reaction
		Assessment of networks and platforms available to fellows	Key informant interviews; document review	1-Reaction
		Changes (if any) in host values, T&Cs in response to scheme	Key informant interviews; document review	2-Learning
		Assessment of cross-fellow and host interactions (e.g. between business and academia)	Key informant interviews; document review	2-Learning
Implementation	To what extent has FLF delivered effective post-award management to support the professional development of the fellows?	Nature of interactions and support given to hosts (e.g. certainty created by funds)	Key informant interviews; document review	1-Reaction
		Nature of interactions and support provided by hosts to fellows	Key informant interviews; document review	1-Reaction
		Assessment of networks and platforms available to fellows	Key informant interviews; document review	1-Reaction
		Review and assessment of post-award requirements made on the fellows	Key informant interviews; document review	1-Reaction
	What, in practice, is felt to be working more/less well regarding the delivery of the FLF?	Perception of effectiveness and value by hosts and fellows	Key informant interviews	1-Reaction
		Case studies exemplifying delivery facets that have worked well and where improvements are required	Key informant interviews; document review	2-Learning
	What are the unexpected barriers or facilitators to FLF processes and the delivery of the anticipated outcomes, if any?	Perception of barriers and enablers by hosts, UKRI and fellows based on delivery and post-award management phase	Key informant interviews	1-Reaction
	What lessons are there for future rounds/similar schemes?	Assessment of process improvements and learning between each cohort and at delivery phase	Key informant interviews	2-Learning
		Assessment of factors that hindered/facilitated programme targets	Key informant interviews; document review	1-Reaction

Table 8: Evaluation question revisions

No.	Evaluation question	Proposed revision
1	To what extent have the FLF applicant, awardee and financial targets been met?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This question to be treated as sub-question of EQ3, with analysis of scheme performance against different diversity criteria • Remove wording regarding 'targets'
2	To what extent is the premise of the FLF scheme unique in the sector?	No change
3	To what extent and how have FLF processes supported multidisciplinary in the fellowship scheme?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broaden wording to 'diversity and multidisciplinary' • Response to cover cross-disciplinary considerations as well as multidisciplinary • Include EQ1 as sub-question
4	To what extent has FLF delivered effective post-award management to support the professional development of the fellows?	No change
5	What, in practice, is felt to be working more/less well regarding the delivery of the FLF?	No change
6	What are the unexpected barriers or facilitators to FLF processes and the delivery of the anticipated outcomes, if any?	No change
7	What lessons are there for future rounds/similar schemes?	No change

Annex B. List of interviewees

Table 9: Summary of interviewees

Group	Interviewee code	Funding round	Sector	Council
Fellows	Int_1	Round 1	Academic	NERC
Fellows	Int_2	Round 1	Academic	EPSRC
Fellows	Int_3	Round 1	Academic	EPSRC
Fellows	Int_4	Round 1	Academic	AHRC
Fellows	Int_5	Round 2	Academic	ESRC
Fellows	Int_6	Round 2	Academic	MRC
Fellows	Int_7	Round 2	Academic	AHRC
Fellows	Int_8	Round 3	Academic	EPSRC
Fellows	Int_9	Round 3	Academic	NERC
Fellows	Int_10	Round 3	Business	ESRC
Fellows	Int_11	Round 3	Business	EPSRC
Fellows	Int_12	Round 4	Academic	ESRC
Fellows	Int_13	Round 4	Academic	STFC
Fellows	Int_14	Round 4	Business	BBSRC
Fellows	Int_15	Round 4	Business	EPSRC
Fellows	Int_16	Round 5	Academic	NERC
Fellows	Int_17	Round 5	Academic	STFC
Fellows	Int_18	Round 5	Business	AHRC
Fellows	Int_19	Round 5	Business	EPSRC
Fellows	Int_20	Round 6	Academic	ESRC
Fellows	Int_21	Round 6	Academic	NERC
Fellows	Int_22	Round 6	Business	EPSRC
Fellows	Int_23	Round 6	Business	AHRC
Fellows	Int_24	Round 2	Academic	NERC
Scheme-level	Int_25 (group of 2)	N/A	N/A	N/A
Scheme-level	Int_26	N/A	N/A	N/A
Scheme-level	Int_27 (group of 2)	N/A	N/A	N/A
Scheme-level	Int_28	N/A	N/A	N/A
Scheme-level	Int_29 (group of 3)	N/A	N/A	N/A
Hosts	Int_30	Round 2	Academic	ESRC
Hosts	Int_31	Round 2	Academic	AHRC
Hosts	Int_32	Round 2	Academic	MRC
Hosts	Int_33	Round 3	Business	EPSRC
Hosts	Int_34	Round 4	Business	BBSRC

RAND Europe

Group	Interviewee code	Funding round	Sector	Council
Hosts	Int_35	Round 5	Business	AHRC
Hosts	Int_36	Round 5	Academic	STFC
Hosts	Int_37	Round 6	Business	EPSRC
Hosts	Int_38	Round 6	Academic	NERC
Unsuccessful applicants	Int_39	N/A	N/A	N/A
Unsuccessful applicants	Int_40	N/A	N/A	N/A
Unsuccessful applicants	Int_41	N/A	N/A	N/A
Unsuccessful applicants	Int_42	N/A	N/A	N/A
Unsuccessful applicants	Int_43	N/A	N/A	N/A
Unsuccessful applicants	Int_44	N/A	N/A	N/A

Annex C. Fellowship comparators

Table 10: Select comparator schemes

Name of scheme	Key scheme goals/ objectives	Year established	Scheme eligibility	Funding amount	Other support provided beyond funding	Fellowship length	Evaluations	Notable features
Henry Dale Fellowships ²⁵¹	The scheme is a partnership between the Royal Society and the Wellcome Trust. It supports research ranging from molecules and the cells vital to life, to the spread of diseases and vectors of disease around the world, to public health research.	2012*	A PhD and significant postdoctoral research experience. Have made important contributions to the area of research. Have sponsorship from a head of department or equivalent at an eligible host organisation in the UK. Conducting research within the biomedical sciences that is aligned to the remit of one of the review panels.	Usually up to around £1.2 million, including salary and research expenses.	The scheme covers a basic salary for the Fellow, as determined by the host organisation; Wellcome Trust fellowship supplement of £7,500 per annum for personal support; research expenses, normally including research post (postdoctoral	Up to 5 years, with the potential to apply for a competitive extension for an additional 3 years.	CRAC ²⁵³	Each year they award Wellcome-Beit Prizes ²⁵⁴ to their most promising fellows who are starting to lead their own independent research programmes. They provide £25,000 to each fellow, to use in their research. Open access and how COVID-19 will change

²⁵¹ As of 8 February 2024: <https://wellcome.org/grant-funding/schemes/sir-henry-dale-fellowships>

²⁵³ As of 8 February 2024: <https://www.crac.org.uk/portfolio/research/evaluation-of-the-sir-henry-dale-fellowships-scheme>

²⁵⁴ As of 8 February 2024: <https://wellcome.org/grant-funding/funded-people-and-projects/wellcome-beit-prize>

RAND Europe

Name of scheme	Key scheme goals/ objectives	Year established	Scheme eligibility	Funding amount	Other support provided beyond funding	Fellowship length	Evaluations	Notable features
					research assistant or technician); various training and development opportunities. ²⁵²			research dissemination. ²⁵⁵
European Research Council Starting Grants²⁵⁶	The ERC's mission is to encourage the highest quality research in Europe through competitive funding and to support investigator-driven frontier research across all fields, based on scientific excellence including Starting Grants.	2007*	Applications can be made in any field of research. Researchers of any nationality with 2–7 years of experience since completion of PhD, a scientific track record showing great promise and an excellent research proposal can apply.	Starting Grants may be awarded up to €1.5 million for a period of 5 years.	Additional €1 million can be made available to cover eligible 'start-up' costs for researchers moving from a third country to the EU or an associated country and/or the purchase of major equipment and/or access to large facilities and/or other major experimental and field work costs.	Up to 5 years	Qualitative evaluation ²⁵⁷ of completed projects funded by the ERC.	Eligibility can be extended for reasons such as maternity, paternity, illness, national service, training, natural disasters, or asylum. COVID-19 adjustments to ERC grant management.
US National Institutes of Health Early Research Career Development programmes²⁵⁸	Career Development Awards are designed for those with a doctoral degree who have	1967*	Eligible Disciplines are biomedical, behavioural, or clinical sciences. Other eligibility requirements:	Varies. Fellowship recipients do not receive salaries or fringe benefits, but they do receive a	The NIH also awards an institutional allowance to the sponsoring institution to help	Up to 5 years of salary support and guaranteed substantial	The NIH data book provides summary statistics on the grant. ²⁵⁹	Legislation requires recipients to pay back to the Federal government their

²⁵² As of 8 February 2024: <https://wellcome.org/grant-funding/schemes/sir-henry-dale-fellowships>

²⁵⁵ As of 8 February 2024: <https://wellcome.org/news/open-access-how-covid-19-will-change-way-research-findings-are-shared>

²⁵⁶ As of 8 February 2024: <https://erc.europa.eu/apply-grant/starting-grant>

²⁵⁷ As of 8 February 2024: https://erc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/qualitative_evaluation_of_completed_projects_funded_by_the_erc.pdf

²⁵⁸ As of 8 February 2024: https://erc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/qualitative_evaluation_of_completed_projects_funded_by_the_erc.pdf

²⁵⁹ As of 8 February 2024: <https://report.nih.gov/nihdatabook/>

Evaluation of the Future Leaders Fellowships scheme

Name of scheme	Key scheme goals/ objectives	Year established	Scheme eligibility	Funding amount	Other support provided beyond funding	Fellowship length	Evaluations	Notable features
	demonstrated independent research accomplishments but need additional experience to establish or sustain an independent research programme. There are four general different kinds of career development awards: Individual mentored awards, Career transition awards, independent awards and the Institutional scientist development programmes.		Each type of NIH grant programme has its own set of eligibility requirements. Generally, PIs and other personnel supported by NIH research grants are not required to be US citizens; however, some NIH programmes/mechanisms have a citizenship requirement.	stipend to help defray living expenses during the research training experience, which is based on educational level and experience. In fiscal year 2021, the NIH awarded \$32.3 billion of its \$42.9 billion appropriation to more than 56,700 new and renewed meritorious research grants.	support the costs of health insurance and other training-related expenses.	protected time to engage in research and related activities.		initial 12 months of NRSA postdoctoral support by engaging in health-related biomedical, behavioural and/or clinical research, health-related research training, health-related teaching, or any combination of these activities.
Marie Skłodowska-Curie postdoctoral fellowships²⁶⁰	The objective of PFs is to support researchers' careers and foster excellence in research. The Postdoctoral Fellowships action targets researchers holding a PhD who wish to carry out their research	1996*	All disciplines are eligible for the fellowship. Not more than 8 years post-PhD, comply with mobility rules. Other requirements: <i>European Postdoctoral Fellowships:</i> Open to researchers moving within Europe or coming to Europe from another	EUR 260.47 million (indicative budget, 2023)	In an effort to build bridges between the academic and non-academic sector, researchers can receive additional support to carry out a placement of up to 6 months in a non-academic	<i>European Postdoctoral Fellowships:</i> 1–2years <i>Global Postdoctoral Fellowships:</i> 2–3 years	MSCA Evaluations – Results of MSCA end of fellowship evaluation questionnaires ²⁶¹	From 2022, resubmission restrictions will apply for applications that received a score below 70% the previous year. Seals of Excellence ²⁶² will be awarded to applications with a total

²⁶⁰ As of 8 February 2024: <https://marie-sklodowska-curie-actions.ec.europa.eu/actions/postdoctoral-fellowships>

²⁶¹ As of 8 February 2024: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/2099ca03-a0a9-11ed-b508-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

²⁶² As of 8 February 2024: <https://marie-sklodowska-curie-actions.ec.europa.eu/actions/postdoctoral-fellowships>

Name of scheme	Key scheme goals/ objectives	Year established	Scheme eligibility	Funding amount	Other support provided beyond funding	Fellowship length	Evaluations	Notable features
	activities abroad, acquire new skills and develop their careers. PFs help researchers gain experience in other countries, disciplines and non-academic sectors.		part of the world to pursue their research career. Researchers of any nationality can apply. <i>Global Postdoctoral Fellowships:</i> Funds the mobility of researchers outside Europe. Only nationals or long-term residents of the EU Member States or Horizon Europe Associated Countries can apply.		organisation based in an EU Member State or Horizon Europe Associated Country. This placement needs to take place at the end of their fellowship. In addition, funding is provided for research, training and networking activities; management and indirect costs.			score <i>equal to or higher than 85%</i> , but which cannot be funded due to lack of budget available under the call.
The Human Frontier Science Program (HFSP) fellowship programme²⁶³	The HFSP fellowship is a programme of funding for frontier research in the life sciences. It is implemented by the International Human Frontier Science Program Organization (HFSP/O) with its office in Strasbourg.	1989 With its collaborative research grants and postdoctoral fellowships, the programme has issued over 4500 awards involving more than 7500 scientists from all over the world. Since the beginning of	<i>Long-Term Fellowships (LTF)</i> are for applicants with a PhD on a biological topic who want to embark on a novel and frontier project focussing on the life sciences. <i>Cross-Disciplinary Fellowships (CDF)</i> are for applicants who hold a doctoral degree from a non-biological discipline (e.g. physics, chemistry, mathematics, engineering or computer sciences) and who have not worked in the life sciences before.	Allowances differ depending on the host country. A complete overview of HFSP fellowship allowances is given in the 2024 application guidelines	Fellows are granted a living allowance as well as a research and travel allowance. Depending on their specific situation fellows may also qualify to receive a child allowance, a parental leave allowance and a relocation allowance.	The HFSP fellowships are for 3 years, with no possibility for renewal.	Yes ²⁶⁴	The HFSP Fellowship can be supplemented from other sources (e.g. from a host supervisor's grant or from institutional funds). HFSP fellows may apply for and hold additional research grants themselves, provided those funds will not be used as a salary for the fellows and are to assist their conduct of

²⁶³ As of 8 February 2024: <https://www.hfsp.org/funding/hfsp-funding/postdoctoral-fellowships>

²⁶⁴ As of 8 February 2024: <https://www.hfsp.org/about/strategy/reviews>

Evaluation of the Future Leaders Fellowships scheme

Name of scheme	Key scheme goals/ objectives	Year established	Scheme eligibility	Funding amount	Other support provided beyond funding	Fellowship length	Evaluations	Notable features
		the programme in 1989, 28 HFSP awardees have gone on to win the Nobel Prize.						the Fellowship research project as presented in the fellow's successful application.

*There is some information available on the number of applicants and awardees for the past few years but no information on the overall number of rounds since the start of the scheme.

Annex D. Additional data tables – portfolio analysis

The charts presented in this annex were derived from UKRI's internal management database.

D.1. Ethnic diversity

Per applicant, Black & Black British awardees received around £72,000 less compared to the overall average, with Mixed awardees receiving just under £13,000 less, and white awardees £500 less than average (Table 11). Success rates were typically higher for white and mixed applicants, and lowest for Chinese or Other applicants. UKRI-wide data for fellowships was not available, though would be instructive here given the gaps in success rates and award amounts.

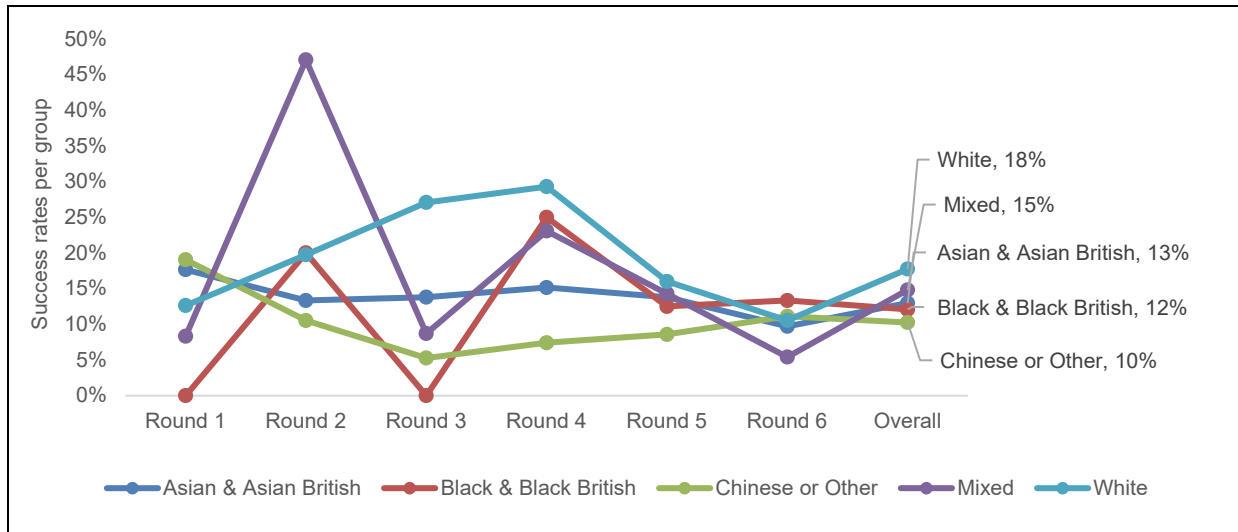
Table 11: Overall proportion and success rates per ethnicity group across all rounds

	Asian & Asian British	Black & Black British	Chinese or Other	Mixed	White	Overall
Proportion	7% (n=31)	1% (n=7)	4% (n=17)	4% (n=20)	84% (n=398)	n/a (n=473)
Success rate	13%	12%	10%	15%	18%	18%
Av. grant size	£1,090,545	£993,618	£1,076,126	£1,052,899	£1,065,037	£1,065,537

Source: RAND Analysis of UKRI grant data. Note: 185 applicants out of 3,027 did not disclose their ethnicity and are excluded here.

When plotted as a time series, success rates between ethnicity groups cluster closer together over time (Figure 8). This may be due to a concerted effort by UKRI to attract more applications from a diverse set of researchers and innovators, though gaps remain.

Figure 8: Success rates by ethnicity groups and by round

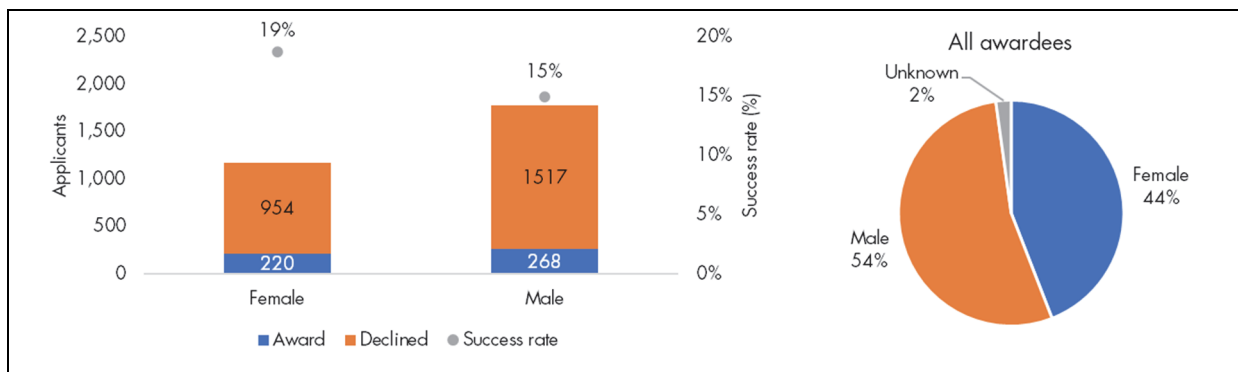


Source: RAND Analysis of UKRI grant data. Note: 185 applicants out of 3,027 did not disclose their ethnicity and are excluded here.

D.2. Gender diversity

Around 42 per cent of UKRI fellowships were awarded to females in 2020/21 (the latest year for which data is available); FLF largely reflects and in some rounds exceeds that average (Figure 9). Success rates tended to be higher for female applicants, though female awardees received £27,000 less on average (£1.058m) compared to male awardees (£1.085m), which could be confounded by disciplinary trends (e.g. some disciplines overrepresented by females also tend to request less funds than others).

Figure 9: Left – total applicants by gender and success rates; right – all awardees by gender



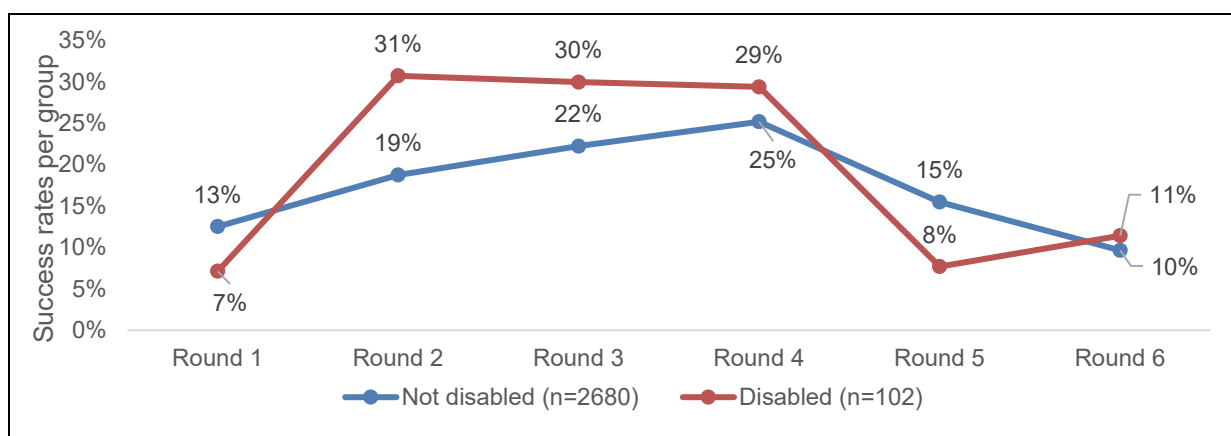
Source: RAND Analysis of UKRI grant data. Note: 68 applicants out of 3,027 did not disclose their gender and are excluded here.

D.3. Disability

Some 18 fellows declared a disability, representing four per cent of the total fellow population, which mirrors the four per cent figure in the UKRI-wide fellowship statistics, indicating FLF largely reflects the numbers from wider schemes regarding awardees with disabilities. Those declaring a disability received on average £27,000 less than those who indicated they were

not disabled, though there are likely factors around discipline to consider here (i.e. some disciplines tend to request less funding than others due to additional costs such as consumables in biological disciplines). Success rates largely followed one another for disabled and not disabled applicants, though disabled applicants did tend to be more successful more often (however, numbers are low overall). UKRI-wide fellowship success rates for disabled applicants tended to be around four per cent higher than for not disabled applicants; in the case of FLF the overall average gap is two per cent (disabled 18 per cent, not disabled 16 per cent). This does not indicate a significant difference, though should be a measure for ongoing monitoring.

Figure 10: Success rates by disability declaration and by round

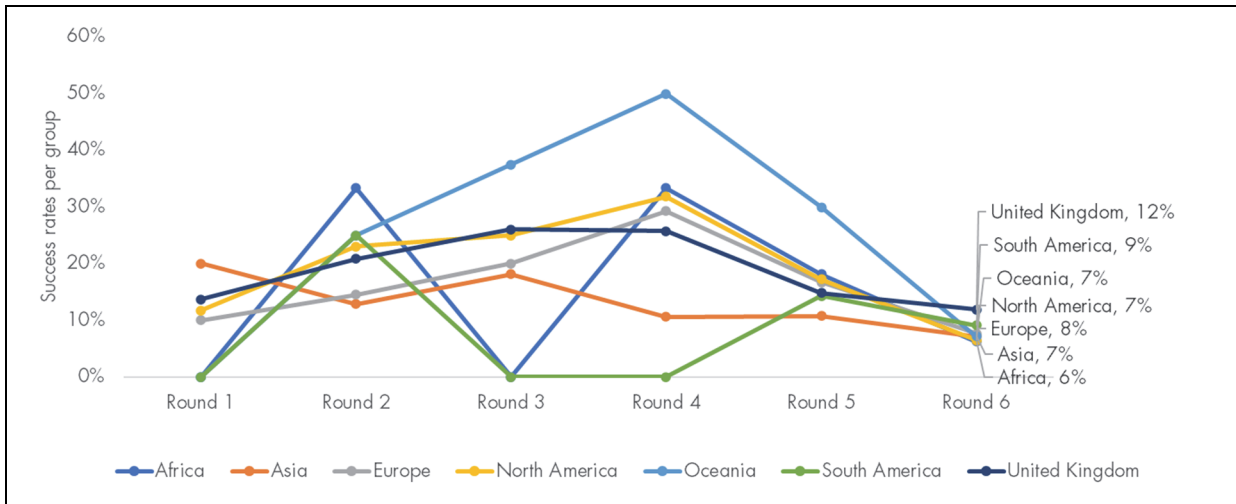


Source: RAND Analysis of UKRI grant data.

D.4. Diverse nationalities

Figure 11 shows the success rates of applicants by nationality, indicating a largely clustered sample in rounds 1 and 2, then much more variance in rounds 3 and 4, before clustering again closely in rounds 5 and 6. Though the numbers cluster, the success rate for applicants from South America, Asia and Africa tended to be lower than others over time (Table 12). There is no other evidence to indicate why this might be, though data to determine whether there is a difference between those applying from outside the UK may be instructive in determining whether being based in a non-UK institution at the point of applications led to differing success rates.

Figure 11: Success rates by applicant nationality and by round



Source: RAND Analysis of UKRI grant data. Note: 74 applicants out of 3,027 did not disclose their nationality and are excluded here.

Table 12: Overall success rates per nationality across all rounds

	Africa	Asia	Europe	North America	Oceania	South America	UK	Overall
Proportion	1%	7%	27%	6%	3%	1%	56%	N/A
Success rate	13%	12%	15%	18%	23%	7%	17%	16%

Source: RAND Analysis of UKRI grant data. Note: 21 awardees out of 499 did not disclose their nationality and are excluded here.

D.5. Research Council

When broken down by Research Council, Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), ESRC, Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) and Science and Technology Facilities Council (STFC) awardees received less funding on average compared to the overall average funding amount per fellowship (£1.071m; Table 13). Proportionally, EPSRC had the highest number of fellows, followed by MRC, though the Council with the highest success rates were STFC and NERC. According to 2020/21 UKRI-wide data on fellowships, EPSRC also awarded the highest proportion in that year (24 per cent), which largely matches the data for that year of FLF.²⁶⁵ The proportions of fellows per Council fluctuated across rounds (Figure 12), with those designated to AHRC and NERC increasing the most over time.

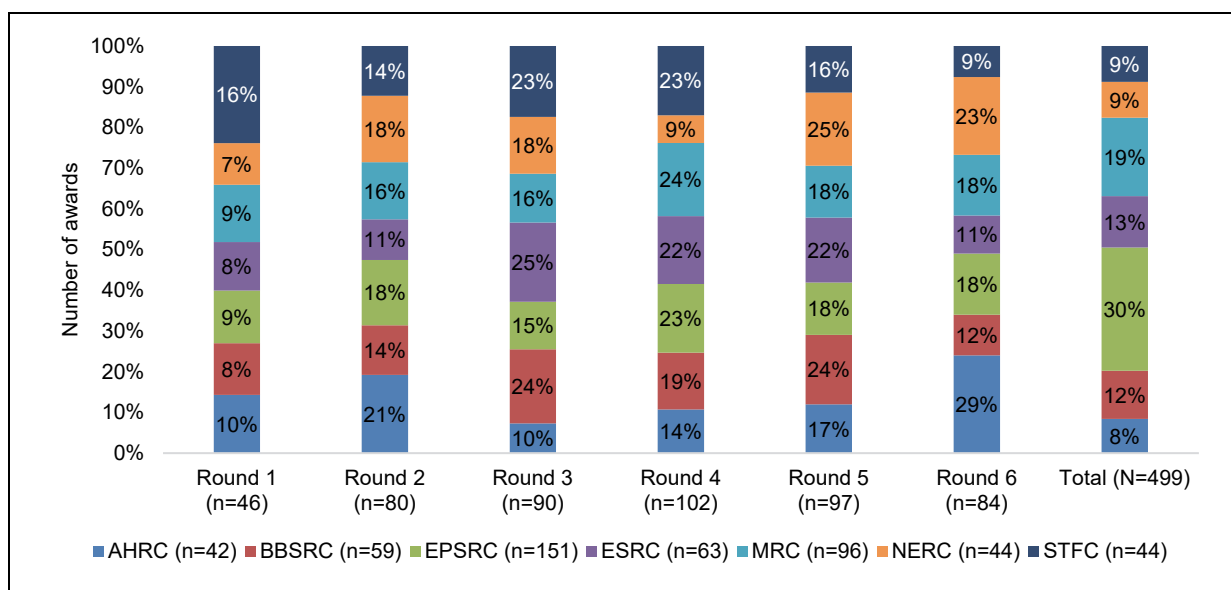
²⁶⁵ UKRI Diversity Data for Funding Applicants and Awardees 2020–21.

Table 13: Overall proportion and success rates per Research Council across all rounds

	AHRC	BBSRC	EPSRC	ESRC	MRC	NERC	STFC
Proportion	8% (n=42)	12% (n=59)	30% (n=151)	13% (n=63)	19% (n=96)	9% (n=44)	9% (n=44)
Success rate	14%	17%	16%	14%	18%	19%	24%
Av. grant size	£927,393	£1,150,214	£1,076,349	£1,001,135	£1,146,638	£1,041,091	£1,049,444

Source: RAND Analysis of UKRI grant data. Note: Round-by-round success rate data per RC was not available, hence only overall figures are given here.

Figure 12: Proportion of awardees by research council per FLF funding round



Source: RAND Analysis of UKRI grant data.

D.6. Host-level data

There were 33 host transfers as of 10 June 2022; 15 of those were by fellows from rounds 1 and 2 and the majority (27) were instigated prior to award.

Table 14 shows the most prolific host organisations in terms of the number of fellows hosted. Only two businesses out of 40 hosted more than once: Sixfold Bioscience Ltd and Ultraleap (both did so twice). Businesses must match-fund fellowships, meaning the investment per person is much more than for academic hosts. Some 63 organisations submitted 10 or more applications across all six rounds.

Table 14: Top 10 most frequent FLF host across all rounds, and success rates

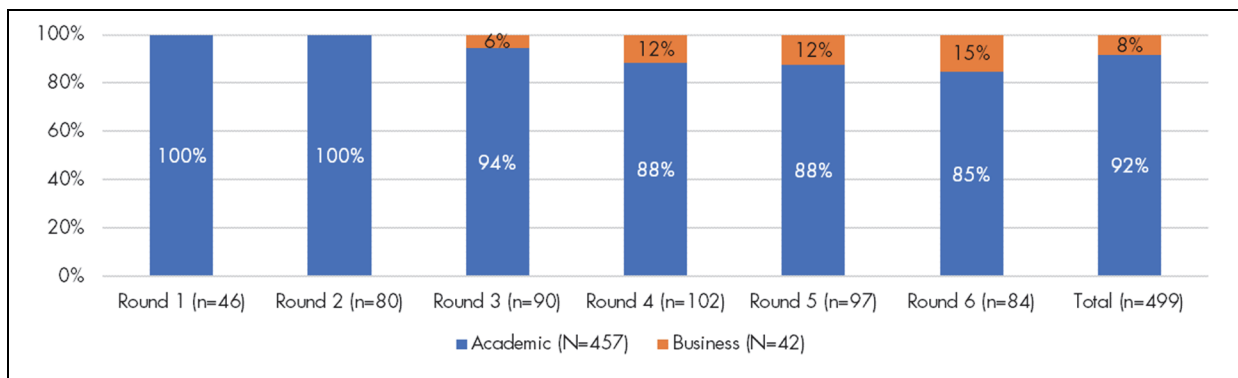
Organisation	Awards	Applications	Success rate
University College London	39	145	27%
University of Edinburgh	25	102	25%
Imperial College London	24	112	21%
King’s College London	20	88	23%
University of Warwick	18	130	14%
University of Oxford	18	100	18%
University of Manchester	18	99	18%
University of Sheffield	17	66	26%
University of Birmingham	16	68	24%
University of Leeds	16	64	25%

Source: RAND Analysis of UKRI grant data.

D.7. Business applicants

From round 3, the number of business applicants awarded FLFs first doubled from round 3 to 4, then remained consistent with a small increase in round 6 (Figure 13). This indicates that UKRI’s efforts to better promote the scheme to businesses were effective. UKRI could consider what proportion of business fellows (currently 15 per cent) it aims to maintain. A larger proportion would give business fellows more networking opportunities in industry, which was a point of feedback from them.

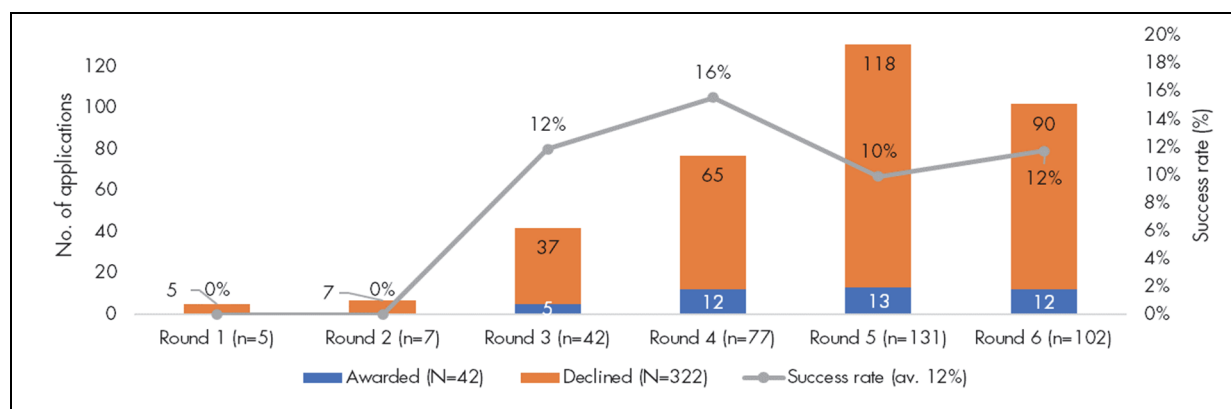
Figure 13: Proportion of awardees by sector per FLF funding round



Source: RAND Analysis of UKRI grant data.

Business applicants applied in increasing numbers across rounds, their success rate increasing in rounds 3 and 4, then decreasing sharply in 5 and 6 as applicant numbers increased and awards remained consistent at around 12 awards per round (Figure 14). We did not find any evidence that business applications were of lower quality in rounds 5 and 6 or that there was any particular misalignment between applicants’ FLF objectives and reviewers’ responses.

Figure 14: Number of business applicants (awardee and unsuccessful) and success rates per FLF funding round



Source: RAND Analysis of UKRI grant data.

On average, academic awardees received £1,086,316, or around £181,000 more than business awardees (£905,423). We did not find any evidence explaining why this was and ruled out the explanation that business applicants requested more but were awarded less. UKRI may consider aiming to understand why the discrepancy exists, but the impact evaluation will explore what implications the lower amounts may have on affected fellows. In general, academic applicants tended to be more successful on average than business applicants, often by ten per cent or more (Table 15). This gap has begun to narrow in recent rounds. This may reflect both a stronger awareness and familiarity of the business community in applying to FLF, and perhaps the same for FLF reviewers in assessing business applications.

Table 15: Comparison of success rates between academic and business applicants

Type of applicant	Round 1	Round 2	Round 3	Round 4	Round 5	Round 6	Average
Academic	13%	21%	27%	29%	17%	10%	18%
Business	0%	0%	12%	16%	10%	12%	12%

Source: RAND Analysis of UKRI grant data. Note: Businesses were not eligible for funding in Rounds 1 and 2, though a small number of business applicants are present in the data (reason unknown).

The evolution of the scheme and the iterative changes in approach started from having no business fellows in the first two rounds, to acknowledging the feasibility of business involvement, with the focus subsequently shifting to attracting business applicants, increasing the cohort significant by round 5, and addressing their concerns in a manner that has been recognised and acknowledged by fellows.²⁶⁶ The focus of UKRI in rounds 5 and 6 has shifted to increasing the spectrum and quality of businesses and applications.²⁶⁷ As detailed above, this shift in focus on quality is the most likely cause of the sharp increase in the number of unsuccessful applicants between rounds 4 and 5.

²⁶⁶ Int_11_Fellow_R3_Business.

²⁶⁷ Int_26_Programme-level.

Annex E. Review process data

Table 16: Summary of sift panel participants

Role	Round 1	Round 2	Round 3	Round 4	Round 5	Round 6	Total
Chair	4	8	6	7	16	14	55
Member	78	153	114	92	231	250	918
Observer	16	48	42	35	56	53	250
Total	98	209	162	134	303	317	1223

Source: UKRI FLF Panel Data (May 2023). RAND analysis. Note: Many participants were involved more than once across rounds. There were 613 unique participations (i.e. individual people; average participations: 2.1).

Table 17: Summary of interview panel participants

Role	Round 1	Round 2	Round 3	Round 4	Round 5	Round 6	Total
Chair	11	13	13	21	24	27	109
Member	48	69	73	103	119	150	562
Observer	40	72	180	347	300	122	1061
Total	99	154	266	471	443	299	1732

Source: UKRI FLF Panel Data (May 2023). RAND analysis. Note: Many participants were involved more than once across rounds. There were 416 unique participations (i.e. individual people; average participations: 4.3).

The interviews followed the format detailed in Table 18.

Table 18: FLF Round 6 interview panel guidance

Panel activity	Time allocated
Closed panel discussion	5 minutes
Candidate welcome and presentation	7 minutes
Candidate welcome and presentation	7 minutes
IM1 interview questions	7 minutes
IM2 interview questions	7 minutes
IM3 interview questions	2 minutes
Any last questions and wrap	2 minutes
Reflection time	10 minutes
Discussion and scoring	3 minutes
Buffer and break	5 minutes

Source: UKRI FLF Round 6 interview panel guidance (January 2022). RAND analysis.