

BBSRC RESPONSE TO THE REVIEW OF BBSRC STRATEGY FOR INVESTING IN FELLOWSHIPS

CONCLUSIONS

- i. There is overwhelming support for Fellowships from the community. This is particularly due to the opportunity Fellowships give researchers to advance their careers and conduct innovative research

BBSRC recognises the extremely strong support from the research community for Fellowships and the enthusiasm for their continuation. The strength of feeling around BBSRC Fellowships was clearly demonstrated by the high response of over 700 respondents to the community survey and appetite for attending the review's associated workshop; the vast majority of feedback received supports BBSRC's continued investment in Fellowship schemes.

- ii. Support for early career researchers i.e. to support independent Postdoctoral Researchers and to establish new Group Leaders should be BBSRC's priority, but opportunities should be available to researchers at all career stages. Fellowships were thought to be most effective when aiding transitions (i.e. career stage, research topic, returning to research)

The important role that Fellowships can play in supporting researchers through key transitions in their careers, in particular the transitions to undertaking independent research and setting up an independent Research Group is recognised. BBSRC is also aware of demand to ensure there are sufficient opportunities for more established academics, whilst recognising the need to balance these conflicting pressures on the limited Fellowship budget.

- iii. There is great demand for a source of funding that would allow Postdoctoral Researchers to independently generate preliminary data that can subsequently be used to support full early career Fellowship applications

BBSRC recognises that many Postdoctoral Researchers would like the opportunity to gain support for the generation of pilot data for subsequent use in Fellowship applications. However, it needs to be recognised that Postdoctoral Researchers are being employed by a Research Organisation to work on a specific project, and mechanisms to support additional independent research cannot take time away from the project on which they are employed or encourage the working of longer than contracted hours. In line with the BBSRC Vision for Postdoctoral Researchers, we encourage Group Leaders and employing Research Organisations to consider the career support for Postdoctoral Researchers as a matter of urgency and for Research Organisations to have published a clear statement of how they will support the continued professional development activities of their postdocs.

- iv. Returners to research are an important area which Fellowships are well suited to support. Fellowships are not the best mechanism by which to target skills gaps and capacity build, although the potential usefulness of limited calls in highly specific areas of need is recognised

The impact of supporting returners to research is noted by BBSRC and it is recognised that if Fellowship calls are introduced to address specific skills areas there needs to be strong evidence of need and of how Fellowships are the most suitable mechanism to address these.

- v. Early career Fellows undertaking research in a variety of scientific areas are needed to ensure future strategic priorities can be met and a requirement for Fellowship applicants to address specific topics could limit this diversity

The importance of maintaining a broad research base and ensuring that a wide range of science areas are investigated by early career researchers is recognised by BBSRC.

- vi. A budget of £9M p.a does not seem sufficient given BBSRC's total expenditure of £518M¹ p.a, and that training the next generation of research leaders is an important part of BBSRC's mission

Fellowships are seen as a key part of BBSRC's portfolio of investment in future leaders of research. BBSRC is aware that the proportion of expenditure invested in Fellowships is below the Research Council average, but at this time in the economic cycle, further funding for Fellowships is not available.

- vii. The current number of David Phillips Fellowships awarded per year is not enough for the scheme to have a significant impact in supporting new Research Groups undertaking BBSRC remit research

BBSRC currently aims to invest in up to 5 David Phillips Fellowships for new Group Leaders per year. Mechanisms to allow an increased number of DPFs to be invested in will be investigated. This will help increase the impact of the scheme on the research landscape, and ensure that those FLFs who wish to pursue a further Fellowship have a BBSRC opportunity while still providing adequate DPF opportunities for those who have not previously received BBSRC support.

- viii. There are various mechanisms by which an increased number of Fellowships could be supported. These include an increased Fellowship budget, caps on individual Fellowship value and a requirement for leveraged funds (from the host Research Organisation and other sources such as industry, charities etc.). If more Fellowships are to be invested in there needs to be a greater understanding of the potential impacts of these options

¹ www.bbsrc.ac.uk/web/FILES/Publications/1314-bbsrc-annual-report-accounts.pdf

BBSRC recognises that the effects of any changes introduced to the Fellowship opportunities available need to be monitored and checked to ensure that the number and quality of applicants and those awarded is not impacted upon.

- ix. It should be expected that Fellowships receive some form of financial support from other organisations, the level of support expected is likely to vary with the seniority of the Fellowship

BBSRC expects all Fellowship proposals to be good value for money and to leverage additional funds wherever possible.

- x. Not all host Research Organisations make a sufficient commitment to Fellows to ensure they are appropriately looked after and receive worthwhile mentoring and support

Good support from the host Research Organisation is important for a successful Fellowship. BBSRC will explore ways to ensure that host Research Organisations make clear statements about the support they are offering to the Fellows, and to make clear that this support is required for the Fellowship to be invested in.

- xi. Fellowships can encourage researchers to prioritise BBSRC remit research throughout their career

The value of Fellowships in supporting researchers to carry out BBSRC remit research is recognised. Supporting both Postdoctoral and new Group Leader Fellowships ensures there is a “pipeline” of BBSRC support from PhD training to running a Research Group.

- xii. The pilot 2014 Anniversary Future Leader Fellowship is important for supporting researchers to make their first steps to independence, but less than one year of postdoctoral research may not be enough to effectively judge the quality of Fellowship candidates

Strong support from across the research community for Postdoctoral level Fellowships is noted, as is the concern that less than one year of Postdoctoral research experience could be an insufficient period in which an applicant can demonstrate their independence. However, two of those awarded Anniversary Future Leader Fellowships during the 2014 pilot call applied before they had received their PhD; how these Fellows progress will need to be tracked before any changes are made to the eligibility criteria of the Future Leader Fellowship.

- xiii. Upper limits of research experience for Fellowship applicants could be ruling out interdisciplinary researchers, people who have completed their PhD in another

country or taken unconventional career paths, and those who become competitive and have excellent ideas later in their career

BBSRC recognises that as they stand the BBSRC Fellowship eligibility criteria can rule out excellent Postdoctoral Researchers who have many years of research experience and who could have excellent research ideas and potential to be a successful research leader.

- xiv. Career tracking is needed to effectively determine the impact of Fellowships

The need to successfully track Fellows once their Fellowship is over is recognised to be of key importance to most effectively determine the impact of the Fellowships BBSRC has invested in.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- i. More Fellowships to support early career researchers and returners to research should be funded. These should be flexible to support a range of researchers and to ensure there are Fellowship opportunities for all talented scientists who show promise of being future leaders

BBSRC will investigate options to increase the number of new early career Fellowships that are supported each year. To demonstrate BBSRC commitment to aiding returners to research BBSRC will look to double the support we currently provide to the Daphne Jackson Trust.

- ii. To avoid ruling out talented individuals there should be more flexibility regarding Fellowship eligibility. When assessing candidates with variable levels of research experience, emphasis should be placed on the most recent track record of a candidate to increase the ease by which such individuals can be compared

Fellowship eligibility criteria need to balance the conflicting views that Fellowship support should be focussed on early career researchers while not ruling out Postdoctoral Researchers who have developed excellent ideas for independent research after several postdoc positions. To address this BBSRC will maintain the 5 year upper limit on the years of postdoctoral research experience that Future Leader Fellows can have, but will remove the limit of 10 years total research experience that is currently in place for the David Phillips Fellowship to support new Group Leaders.

- iii. BBSRC should consider increasing its level of investment in Fellowships to the Research Council average

BBSRC recognise that Fellowships are key to its mission. BBSRC will continue to monitor its Fellowships portfolio to ensure it continues to be supported appropriately. With this BBSRC will:

- Continue to support at least 12 Future Leader Fellows per year and as part of this commitment provide the cohort with management training
 - Continue its support for a small number of high profile David Phillips Fellowships
- iv. There should be Fellowship opportunities across the whole of a researcher's career, from those wishing to conduct their first independent research to established academics

BBSRC will investigate a number of low-cost options, using existing mechanisms, to recognise excellent researchers at any stage of their career and give them the opportunity to focus on particular aspects of their research. It should be noted that established academics can also apply for the Flexible Interchange Programme (FLIP), allowing them to take their research in a new direction or interact with another sector, and the Enterprise Fellowship, allowing them to work full time to develop a business idea and seek investment.

- v. Funding should be available for the generation of pilot data to support subsequent Fellowship / funding applications. This is particularly needed at the Postdoctoral Researcher career stage

BBSRC will investigate potential novel mechanisms by which to support such activities. However, given current budgetary and administrative constraints, BBSRC does not view this as a priority while changes to our current Fellowship programmes are being implemented. Furthermore, any mechanisms introduced would need to support Postdoctoral Researchers in a way that does not take time away from the project for which they are receiving postdoctoral funding, or support / encourage them to work longer than their contracted number of hours.

- vi. Research Organisations wishing to host Fellows need to give a formal commitment regarding the support and mentoring system that will be in place to provide support

BBSRC will make the degree of support and the environment provided by a Fellow's host an important part of the Fellowship review process when assessing whether the proposed host is the best location for the applicant to hold their Fellowship. Furthermore, BBSRC will consider other potential mechanisms by which the degree of support provided by Research Organisations to Fellows can be guaranteed.