



## **Executive summary**

### **Purpose**

1. HEFCE's Research Capability Fund supports research in subjects where the national research base is currently not as strong as in more established subjects. This review aimed to evaluate the success of the scheme in building research capability, to identify any areas for further action, and to inform a recommendation to the HEFCE Board on whether to extend funding until 2008-09.

### **Key points**

2. Seven subject areas (units of assessment in the Research Assessment Exercise) are eligible for this funding:

- art and design
- communication, cultural and media studies
- dance, drama and performing arts
- nursing
- other studies and professions allied to medicine
- social work
- sports-related studies.

3. The review was conducted by HEFCE research policy officers, and members of the expert panels who assessed the strategies submitted by institutions in order to receive the original funding.

4. Key findings were that:

- a. The fund had been used broadly as intended to build research capability.
- b. Generally institutions found it helpful to produce strategies and set specific targets for use of the funding.
- c. Continuation of funding until 2008-09 is likely to result in significant improvement in the amount and quality of research capacity in the seven subjects, helping institutions to build a sustainable research base in those subjects.

5. In the light of these findings, a recommendation was made to the HEFCE Board to continue funding. Its decision to do so was announced in HEFCE Circular letter 29/2005.

## Background

6. The Research Capability Fund supports research in subject areas where the national research base is still developing and is currently not as strong as in more established subjects. Seven units of assessment (UOAs) in the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) are eligible for this funding, selected on the basis that they had low proportions of staff in departments rated 4, 5, 5\* in the 2001 RAE, and had relatively high proportions of staff in 3a or 3b-rated departments.

7. The subjects supported by the fund are:

- art and design (UOA 64<sup>1</sup>)
- communication, cultural and media studies (UOA 65)
- dance, drama and performing arts (UOA 66)
- nursing (UOA 10)
- other studies and professions allied to medicine (UOA 11)
- social work (UOA 41)
- sports-related studies (UOA 69).

8. The capability fund is distributed to English higher education institutions (HEIs) by reference to the number of research-active academic staff in the 2001 RAE submissions rated 3a or 3b, weighted according to the cost weight of the UOA. The value of the allocations in relation to research volume is broadly equivalent to allocations of mainstream quality-related (QR) research funding to departments rated 4 in those same disciplines.

9. In order to receive this funding, institutions were asked to submit three-year strategies (from 2003-04 to 2005-06) for each UOA for which funding had been allocated. The strategies were assessed by one of two panels of experts: either the arts-related panel or the health, social work and sports studies panel. Progress against strategies submitted by HEIs to HEFCE is monitored through their annual monitoring statement. HEIs report progress against targets and milestones.

10. At its meeting in December 2003 the HEFCE Board agreed that funding for research capability should continue up to the next RAE, subject to a review. The review and the recommendation on continuation of funding were to be undertaken in 2005 to inform allocations for 2006-07, programmed to be announced in HEFCE's grant letter to institutions in March 2006.

## Review

11. The objectives of the review were:

- to evaluate the success of the scheme in building research capability within the seven subject areas, and to identify any areas of weakness that require further action

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<sup>1</sup> Units of assessment are as defined in the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise.

- to inform a decision to extend funding on the present basis (or with modifications if strong reasons for this should emerge) until 2008-09.

12. The review was conducted through visits to a sample of institutions that receive capability funding. A variety of types and sizes of institution were selected, and at least two departments in each relevant UOA were visited. The visits were undertaken by a HEFCE research policy officer and a member of one of the panels that assessed the original strategies, or where this was not possible by two HEFCE policy officers. These reviewers met institutional administrators and researchers in departments that receive capability funding and asked them about their experience of the Research Capability Fund. The list of the questions is attached at Annex A. The list of panel members is at Annex B.

13. Visits were summarised in a series of case studies agreed by all participants as a true account. This information was presented to the panels, so that they could assess whether the case studies provided a typical example of progress in their subject discipline, and whether this was sufficient to recommend continued funding.

14. Reviewers visited 18 departments in 9 different HEIs, out of a total of 134 departments in 69 different HEIs that currently receive capability funding. Therefore the sample may not have captured a comprehensive list of effects of capability funding in each discipline across the whole of England. However it can give an overview of the effects, while maintaining a light-touch approach to HEFCE monitoring arrangements.

## Results

15. General conclusions can be drawn that cover all subjects receiving the special funding. Most departments visited found the scheme extremely valuable. The ring-fencing of funds tied to specific strategies provided a much needed financial investment as well as several 'value-added' benefits. These included the following:

- a predetermined source of funding for three years allowed a greater degree of planning, and enabled staff to re-arrange their teaching commitments so that they could take research leave
- the esteem value of receiving capability funding encouraged the host institution and external funders to invest further in these departments
- the recruitment of additional staff achieved the 'critical mass' necessary for some departments to take advantage of their host universities' arrangements for taking research leave, where previously there was not enough cover for teaching duties to do so
- expectations among staff increased, and they were determined to take advantage of this opportunity
- creating a cost code for a particular department or research group allowed additional funding to flow directly to that department.

16. Most departments visited found useful both the process of writing a strategy and setting targets for three years, and the advice that they received from the panels on their

strategies. In most cases this process required an adaptation of existing research strategies, but for some departments it prompted staff to think about what they hoped to achieve in the longer term, and the creation of a three-year strategy provided a focus and impetus for the research group. The one criticism received was that the time frame for submitting strategies (3 May 2003 to 20 June 2003) was very short.

17. The departments visited responded positively to the review process, leading to some informative and constructive conversations about capacity building. This experience was valuable for the reviewers, and the participating institutions and departments also seemed to find it valuable.

18. Most departments had achieved all their targets and milestones, with only three units not meeting targets or reporting delays in spending the full allocation awarded to them. Generally this was caused by a delay in the recruitment of staff or students, and therefore will be recovered over time. There were some adjustments to the original strategies in light of changing circumstances, and it was encouraging that departments reviewed their strategies on a regular basis and optimised use of their resources.

Examples of such adjustments were:

- where demand for pump-priming funding had not been as high as expected, the department reallocated this funding towards the cost of a research fellow
- where research assistants were funded by external grants, the funding planned for investment in research assistants was used to fund additional PhD studentships.

19. Most of the departments felt that they were making progress towards building research capacity, and 13 out of 18 were confident of improving their performance in the next RAE in 2008. Of those that were less sure about their chances in the 2008 RAE, most were convinced that they had improved the quality and quantity of research, but were also aware that the baseline of research quality was improving nationally and were not confident that their progress would be sufficient. Some departments were concerned whether they had to submit to the UOA for which they had received capability funding (this was particularly relevant to those who felt that the new UOA for Epidemiology, Public Health Research and Health Services Research might be of more relevance to their research). HEFCE confirmed that departments should submit to whichever UOA they considered would be best qualified to assess their research. HEFCE noted that it would need to consider how best to monitor the results of funding in RAE 2008 given the changes from the 2001 exercise: specifically the introduction of a quality profile instead of ratings, and changes in the boundaries between UOAs.

### **Nursing (UOA 10)**

20. Reviewers visited three departments that receive research capability funding for nursing. All showed progress and had been able to capitalise on the funding. There were some examples of good practice that has improved the culture and management of the department in relation to:

- encouraging NHS professionals to undertake a PhD, for example by topping up bursaries or involving NHS staff in academic research

- staff recruitment
- a more efficient ethics approvals process for research, by working closely with local ethics approvals committees and HEI staff members sitting on approvals committees or NHS Trust management boards, to gain a greater understanding of the process. Also one department had created an internal approvals committee.

21. The main concerns that departments identified were:

- difficulty in gaining Research Council funding
- difficulty in getting local NHS research funding
- the change from named Department of Health awards for nursing and allied health professions for three specific levels of researcher (research development, post-doctoral and career scientists) to a generic Research Capacity Development Award scheme. (A separate analysis of this award scheme has shown that the number of applications from nursing academics has dropped but the success rate has risen)
- problems in finding time to research, with high demands on staff time for teaching.

### **Other subjects and professions allied to medicine (UOA 11)**

22. Reviewers visited three departments that receive research capability funds for other subjects and professions allied to medicine. All showed progress in their subject area relative to their starting position, but some started from a stronger position than others. All these departments have had support from their host institution, either in the recruitment of research leaders, investment in equipment, or support in making a successful bid to the Science Research Investment Fund (SRIF). This UOA appeared to have a greater need for investment in equipment than any of the others visited. Without the support from their host institution in addition to capability funding, departments felt that they would not have progressed as well as they have.

23. The strengths identified by departments in this UOA were:

- research leadership and management. Some units created external peer review panels to assess their research performance annually and to give feedback and advice on their research strategy
- support for developing researchers, through workshops, seminars, mentoring and small grants schemes
- a strategic focus to the research undertaken, and developing niche areas of research.

24. The main concerns they identified were:

- the high level of investment needed to become competitive, particularly in relation to infrastructure costs
- securing funding for research technicians necessary to maintain high-tech equipment
- the difficulty in gaining Research Council funding

- high reliance on funding from the EU and charities which covers only a part of the costs of the research, requiring a significant contribution from the HEI.

### **Social work (UOA 41)**

25. Two departments that receive research capability funding for social work were visited. Both had spent the funds as set out in their strategy and had met most of their targets. However, the organisation of their research activity in collaboration with other subjects made it difficult to identify the progress exclusive to social work. Both departments had encountered particular problems in implementing their strategies.

26. The main problems experienced were:

- achieving and maintaining an adequate body of academic staff to undertake research – both had suffered from staff losses and had difficulty in recruiting replacements in a competitive national market
- recruiting PhD students – both felt that most students study social work to enter practice and are not engaged by research, and that there is little incentive in professional practice for practitioners to undertake a PhD
- particular issues in relation to establishing social work as a discrete research discipline. Both departments worked closely with other faculties, providing valuable additions to their research projects, but struggled to work as an independent discipline
- finding time to research with high demands on staff time for teaching
- engaging in international debate, because social work is often focused on national provision, and the definitions of social work differ greatly between countries, although this difference can be an area of research
- the difficulty of assessing international excellence within the context of the above.

### **Sports-related studies (UOA 69)**

27. Reviewers visited two sports-related studies departments that receive research capability funding. Both had made good progress. One HEI reported improvements in staff communication and staff development, and both had invested significant resource in establishing a research culture and developing research students and early career researchers.

28. The main concerns they identified were:

- the difficulty in getting external funding, particularly for some sub-disciplines such as sport performance
- low journal impact factors within their field of study, perceived to have a negative effect on their host institution's and external funders' opinions of their publication record, despite assurances that the RAE would not take account of journal impact factors
- staff retention (although this has improved since capability funding was introduced).

## **Art and design (UOA 64)**

29. Three art and design departments that receive capability funding were visited. All departments had made progress and met all or most of their targets, with only one major slippage due to a delay in setting up an MA course. A benefit of funding identified by two departments was that the capability funding had forced more joint working within the department to achieve shared aims, and that this internal collaboration encouraged a livelier, more supportive research culture.

30. The main concerns identified by departments in this UOA were:

- the amount of physical space needed for staff and PhD students to work: this was seen as a limiting factor in recruitment
- shortage of time to undertake practice as research (in daylight hours) alongside teaching and administration duties
- how to define what was practice and what was research
- concern as to whether departments with a strong focus on practice as research will be awarded high RAE ratings.

31. A number of these comments were made before the publication of the RAE 2008 criteria and guidelines for submission, which have made explicit reference to practice-based and applied research. Furthermore, the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) has announced a 12 month review of practice-led research in art, architecture and design. It has also been working with the Council for Higher Education in Art and Design (CHEAD) on an investigation into the nature of the scholarly infrastructure in practice-led research in the creative and performing arts.

## **Communication, cultural and media studies (UOA 65)**

32. Three departments were visited that receive funding for communication, cultural and media studies. All have progressed relative to their different starting points. Two departments were particularly reliant upon early career researchers, and had initially focused their capability funding on building up their public output, but were now at a stage where they needed to gain external funding. Some of the funding has been used to pay for consultancy visits from departments rated 5 in the RAE. This proved very valuable, as external peers were able to advise about the best means of gaining external funding, how to present their achievements within the RAE, and how to take a more strategic approach to research planning.

33. The concerns expressed by departments in this UOA were:

- small departments struggle to achieve a critical mass of researchers
- departments with a very high proportion of early career researchers may need to strengthen their internal research leadership through external networks or by taking advice on a consultancy basis
- against this background, research capability funding may not continue long enough for them to achieve their potential.

## **Dance, drama and performing arts (UOA 66)**

34. Reviewers visited two departments that receive capability funding for dance, drama and performing arts. In both departments there were delays in spending the funds because of internal restructuring or devising schemes through which to award the funding. However both feel that they have made progress in developing a research culture, through the use of the capability fund to support staff research leave, travel and expenses.

35. A strength of these departments has been their practice as research, encouraged by the Practice As Research In Performance (PARIP) initiative funded by the AHRC. It has been an exciting part of developing their research culture and engaging staff and students, and they have both collaborated with external partners, gaining experience and improved reputation by association. They also found that their practical teaching has informed their research and vice versa.

36. The concerns identified are:

- limitations on space for practice-based research, especially as space is in high demand for teaching
- whether the cultural value of their work will be valued as highly as the applied science research in future rounds of the Higher Education Innovation Fund.

37. It is worth noting that some departments in the UOAs for dance, drama and performing arts and for art and design were under the misapprehension that because they were funded under the Research Capability Fund they were not eligible for SRIF funding, which might alleviate some of their infrastructure problems. HEFCE confirmed that they are eligible for SRIF, although HEIs are at liberty to distribute allocations internally as they see fit, and according to the institutional strategy. Further details on the current round of SRIF are in HEFCE 2005/08.

## **Conclusions**

38. The main conclusions based upon the review visits are:

- a. The fund has been used broadly as intended, to build research capability within the seven UOAs.
- b. Institutions and departments have generally found the requirement to produce strategies and to set specific targets helpful. In a minority of cases significant variance in practice has already developed between the initial strategy and current activity, but where this has happened it is generally beneficial and in keeping with the broad aims of the strategy.

c. If funding continues until 2008-09, over the seven years of the initiative this is likely to result in a significant improvement in the amount and quality of research in the disciplines nationally.

d. Continued funding would materially help institutions in building and maintaining a healthy and sustainable research base in 'capability subjects' in the longer term.

e. Departments visited in all disciplines expressed some practical concerns about building research capability. These will largely be addressed within the extended scheme, and some are being tackled within the wider subject communities through various initiatives.

## Annex A

### List of review questions

#### Funding

1. How has the money improved the department culture/activity?
2. Has it been difficult to spend the money? Or has it been difficult to stay within budget?

#### Targets and strategies

3. Did you find target setting difficult?
4. Have you revised your strategies in light of new knowledge?
5. What are the main changes to your strategies and why were these brought about?
6. Did you find the requirement to set strategies helpful/unhelpful?
7. How often is the strategy reviewed and by whom?

#### Barriers

8. What are the barriers (internal and external) to building capability?
9. Are there any 'gaps' in the funding landscape?

#### Research areas

10. Who are your main funders?
11. What are your main areas of research (sub-discipline level)?
12. Are these largely responsive (ie, derived predominantly from staff interests and skills/ available funding/ any other factors) or do you set strategic aims?

#### Improvement

13. Do feel that the funding has improved research *quality*?
14. Do you felt that the funding has improved research *quantity*?

#### Future

15. In further rounds of funding, would you advise policy makers to ask for strategies or would you suggest an alternative approach to allocating funds?
16. How sustainable is your research within the capability subject (in terms of both staff and PhD students, external funding, internal allocation)?

## Annex B

### Research Capability Fund panels

#### Health, social work and sports-related studies

Professor Janet Finch (Chair)	University of Keele (Nursing and allied health)
Professor Roger Watson	University of Hull (Nursing)
Professor Audrey Mullender	University of Warwick (Social work)
Dr Avril Drummond	University of Nottingham (Other studies and professions allied to medicine)
Professor Clyde Williams	Loughborough University (Sports studies)
Professor Chris Gratton	Sheffield Hallam University (Sports studies)

#### Arts-related subjects

Professor Martin White (Chair)	University of Bristol (Drama)
Professor Bruce Brown	University of Brighton (Design)
Professor Charlotte Brunsdon	University of Warwick (TV and film)
Professor Stephen Buckley	University of Reading (Fine art)
Professor Ian Christie	Birkbeck College, London (Film)
Professor Paul Gough	University of the West of England, Bristol (Fine art)
Professor Stephanie Jordan	Roehampton University (Dance)

## List of abbreviations

AHRC	Arts and Humanities Research Council
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEI	Higher education institution
HEIF	Higher Education Innovation Fund
RAE	Research Assessment Exercise
SRIF	Science Research Investment Fund
UOA	Unit of assessment