

**External Evaluation of the BA/Leverhulme Small Research
Grants Scheme**

Submitted by

Laura R Meagher, PhD, Technology Development Group

with

Ann J Kettle

Edengrove House

Dairsie, Fife KY15 4RP

Laura.Meagher@btinternet.com

07714 090628

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

The BA/Leverhulme Small Research Grants scheme provides small-scale funding (up to £10K for up to two years) which is flexible and accessible. The goal of the scheme is to support research by UK-resident postdoctoral scholars (including independent researchers at any stage including retirement), to stimulate innovation, encourage interdisciplinarity, and enable advancement of research through activities such as workshops, conferences, and visits by or to collaborative scholars, whether in the UK or abroad. With these grants, research ideas may be developed or piloted, fieldwork may be conducted, research partnerships may be built, and research findings may be disseminated. Academic outputs can include: research publications, research resources, conference talks and proceedings. Non-academic outputs can include publications, broadcasts, talks, websites and exhibitions. Scheme objectives, agreed with BEIS in the Academy's delivery plan and the Leverhulme Trust, are:

- To enable and support new research ideas and creativity in humanities and social sciences.
- To support excellent, innovative individual or collaborative research, with wide-ranging cultural, social and economic benefits.
- To fund a clearly defined, discrete piece of research, which will have an identifiable outcome on completion of the Academy-funded component of the project.

This evaluation identified and assessed impacts of the Small Research Grants scheme, reviewing the extent to which the scheme is meeting its aims and objectives and in so doing contributing to the health and development of the UK's research base. Focussing on the up to 300 Small Research Grants per 12-month period awarded from 2015/16 to 2018/19, the multi-method evaluation included: document analysis; a survey of award-holders (727 respondents); a 'counterfactual' survey of highly ranked but not awarded individuals in 2018 (66 respondents); twenty-five semi-structured interviews gathering multiple perspectives; and a dozen vignettes illustrating different sorts of impacts and benefits. Methods and analysis were integrated with a common Framework of Core Questions.

Conclusions

Our central conclusion as evaluators is that the Small Research Grants scheme is outstandingly successful. It meets all its aims and provides exceptional value for money in doing so. The small-scale funding it provides has enabled researchers at all career stages and statuses to conduct robust, innovative and often interdisciplinary work. In so doing, awards have contributed directly and indirectly to career advancement. The research projects supported have led to a strong portfolio of academic outputs, frequently leveraging follow-on funding from other sources. Numerous non-academic outcomes have been generated as well, with effects from the projects felt in a wide range of sectors as they have informed multiple societal issues. Collaborations, including international partnerships and networks, have been established through the scheme, which enables the international travel seen as crucial to tackling many of the research problems addressed. The small amounts of funding, coupled with the large number of grants, enables the scheme to be open to creative, novel ideas; this minimizes risk-taking while maximising a diversified portfolio of outcomes.

The Small Research Grants scheme is distinctive in many ways. It is seen as enabling novel work in the humanities and social sciences, particularly as its scale of funding and openness of criteria makes it accessible to individual researchers with a focused idea and/or a desire to test (pilot) a novel approach. The fact that this openness extends to interdisciplinary proposals allows researchers to circumnavigate the 'falling between stools' hazards of most other funding sources. These aspects of the scheme allow it to play what appears to be a unique role within the UK's research funding landscape. Basically, researchers in the

humanities and social sciences would appear to have nowhere else to turn for the sort of novel small-scale projects that can leverage disproportionately strong results - other than the low levels of internal funding available at some well-resourced universities, or very small amounts potentially available from professional bodies/societies (sometimes specific to subjects or countries), or occasional fellowships. Another notable feature of the scheme is its inclusivity. Recipients of the grants awarded through a rigorous review process span a commendably wide range of institutions; this heightened diversity of supported work and advanced careers enhances the depth and resilience of humanities and social sciences research in the UK.

Recommendations for Consideration

Our central recommendation is to continue the Small Research Grants scheme. We commend the British Academy and its partners for supporting such an effective scheme, that supports high-quality and innovative work by such a wide range of researchers, across subject areas, career stages and institutions.

We would urge the Academy to preserve the openness of its review processes, to ensure that this exceptional niche of support continues, as this will enhance the humanities and social sciences landscape of the future.

Even though it certainly has 'enough' applicants already, the Academy might consider tactically promoting the scheme to certain audiences. In any such promotion, care should be taken with what might seem to be an oxymoron: clarity regarding lack of restrictions. Any description of the scheme should convey its welcoming 'attitude', as it is exceptional to find a scheme that is not only aware of the value of focused small-scale projects but is also so welcoming of novel, piloting, interdisciplinary or even subversive ideas tackled with any of a wide range of existing or new methodologies.

A few quite specific recommendations would be to consider a very modest increase to the 'cap', perhaps even just to £11K. It would be important to retain the 'small' nature of these grants in order to allow a large number of investments. We would recommend continuing with 24 months as the normal duration, but perhaps adding even further flexibility in terms of even multiple no-cost extensions when reasoned arguments are made. In these times particularly, we would strongly recommend continuing the international dimension of the scheme and thus allowing international travel where applicable. Administration of the scheme appears to be widely regarded as straightforward, flexible and helpful. The one change we would recommend for consideration would be for the Academy to communicate to rejected applicants who were highly ranked that their proposals were regarded as strong. While we recognise that providing extensive feedback is clearly impractical, even this one sentence of additional feedback could greatly encourage individuals.

Finally, we noted with interest the sheer number of worthy applicants who are ranked highly but for whom, however promising their projects, no money was available. We would encourage the Academy, and its partners, to attempt to secure more funding for this scheme. An increase in the number of these small-scale grants would maintain the value for money so distinctive in the current scheme and would multiply the benefits arising from it.