

RESEARCH BOOST LEAVE

Background

In 2022, to increase research activity at AU and to encourage research excellence, University Executive approved a 'Research Boost' paper. A key element of this paper was a new, competitive University research leave scheme to stand alongside the existing regular programme of research leave managed at Faculty level.

The Research Boost paper reflected the principles underpinning the University's Research & Innovation Strategy. The research leave scheme outlined in this paper (hereafter 'Research Boost Leave') specifically addresses the principles of 'ambition' and 'confidence'. It demonstrates the University's commitment to developing greater confidence in the priority we will give to research activities alongside L&T; and is intended to encourage ambitious research capable of generating outputs of a REF 4* standard.

This paper outlines how the Research Boost Leave scheme will operate from session 2023-4, and the purpose and principles underpinning the scheme. (For session 2022-3, an interim scheme is being managed by each Faculty.) It draws on a process of consultation including two town hall meetings, meetings with Faculty research leads (in two instances, with Faculty Research Committees) and with the Women in Research Network's executive. This process of consultation revealed a number of competing ideas across AU concerning what the scheme should prioritise and its purpose. As a result, not all of the ideas proposed by staff can be accommodated within this scheme and choices had to be made.

Purpose and Principles

1. The scheme is to boost *research*. Although research and innovation are intimately linked in the contemporary landscape, and although priority is increasingly being given by funders (including UK and Welsh Governments) to KEC, the University has recently increased its funding and support for such activities (eg the impact leave scheme, various RWIF initiatives, Aberinnovation, the NSC, VetHub1, and the establishment of the enterprise hub). The focus of this scheme is therefore on research leading to outstanding academic outputs.
2. The scheme is to promote and encourage *excellence* in research, broadly understood as REF 4* quality, the indicators for which are contained in the REF2021 documentation (see Appendix One). Although there was considerable interest in an alternative approach which 'levelled up' research across AU and created an environment where all staff could benefit from improved resourcing for research, this Research Boost scheme is not resourced at a level sufficient to realise this. Moreover, this alternative approach is the role of the regular programme of research leave and requires the effective implementation of that scheme. Research

Boost Leave is not to provide a band-aid for the existing programme, but to promote excellence, not least (but not exclusively) to place AU in a better position for the next REF.

3. The scheme will be inclusive and offer equal opportunities for researchers. It is not a reward for past performance but to promote research leading to world class outputs from researchers at any level.¹ It recognises that not all staff start from a level playing field. The awarding panel will recognise that expectations for lecturers/senior lecturers may be different than those for readers/professors. The scheme also recognises that for a variety of reasons – personal and professional – some staff may not have had the same opportunities to develop their research as others. But in so doing it must not inadvertently penalise those staff who have undertaken excellent research and demonstrated an ability to produce world class outputs. How to balance these is not straightforward, especially post-pandemic where staff research has suffered in an uneven manner, and the solution proposed below in h (iv) may need to be revisited once the scheme has been running and lessons learned.
4. The scheme is for staff on T&R contracts. RO staff by definition should have sufficient time to conduct research.
5. The scheme should not have an overly negative impact on the running of departments and on L&T. Therefore, for those researchers who are successful in the scheme, departments will have the funding for an associate lecturer level post for the duration of the award to retain capacity. It is recognised that a ‘like for like’ may not always be possible, therefore the competition will be run such that the results are known by the end of the calendar year prior to the session where leave will be taken, to enable departments to plan effectively. (So, for example, in the first year the competition will be run such that the results are known by beginning January 2023 for implementation in session 2023-4).² It is also recognised that the scheme may leave gaps in the management or administration of departments. Departments are therefore encouraged to see this as an opportunity to develop resilience in the management of departments (including possible succession planning) and as a means of developing skills and experience amongst colleagues.

How the scheme will operate

- a. The scheme will be run on an annual basis with applications in the session prior to the proposed research leave being taken.

¹ There was some interest expressed by colleagues in limiting the scheme to non-professorial staff, on the grounds that professors should be sufficiently well positioned as to not need such a ‘boost’. This however prima facie contradicts the principle of equal opportunity, and would not appear to be in the wider interests of the University building up to the next REF by failing to support those outstanding researchers amongst the professoriate. However, discussion revealed that underpinning this is a real concern over the research development of what might be termed ‘mid-career staff’. Discussions are now beginning – within AU and with partners – over how to address this.

² An interim scheme is being run for session 2022-3.

- b. The scheme will be competitive and applications will be assessed by a panel consisting the 3 ADRs, the Director of Research Excellence & Impact and chaired by the PVC (R, KE &I). Priority will be given to probable excellence of planned research outputs and the credibility of plans (excepting the Research Development route identified in h(iv) below).
- c. It will be a University scheme, but Faculty minimum sub-ceilings will be established to ensure a spread of awards. (For example, if there are 15 awards in a year, each Faculty may be given a minimum of 3 awards).
- d. Applications should outline the planned research and output(s), and provide a credible argument as to how this will be of REF 4* quality (see Appendix One below). For example, applications may directly address the REF criteria of originality, significance and rigour, may reference how it will advance knowledge substantially, or provide evidence of a book contract with a leading academic publisher based on a peer reviewed proposal.
- e. All applications must include a sign-off from the HoD (or equivalent, eg in the case of the vet school and nursing) and FPVC, indicating that they support the application. It is therefore advisable that staff considering an application to this scheme discuss it with their HoD or equivalent at an early stage.
- f. The scheme will relieve staff of departmental teaching and administration, but not PGR supervision. Faculty or University roles will continue, and in these instances the funded replacement will be on a pro rata basis. (For example, if a researcher has a 0.3 FTE Faculty role, then only the 0.7 role in their department will be covered by an associate lecturer).
- g. It is envisaged that in many instances (excepting staff with University/Faculty appointments) the funded replacement will be at 1.0 FTE. However, applications can be made for lower amounts when a researcher requires some but not total relief from departmental responsibilities. In these instances, the number/size of outputs envisaged may be lower, but not the expected quality. Given the lower level of resource required to fund this, such applications may be welcomed by the awarding committee, but HoDs are advised that this may pose recruitment or other difficulties and this should be considered when supporting an application.
- h. The scheme will consist of a number of routes, which may be developed over time as lessons are learned. Initially four routes will be available and applications will be required to indicate which route is being applied for:
 - i. 1 year research leave, with planned outputs commensurate with this level of resourcing.
 - ii. 1 semester Research Boost Leave to follow a period of standard University research leave to complete a major project/programme of work.
 - iii. 1-2 year associate lecturer to provide specified relief from teaching and/or administration for a research team. In other words, the AL will provide relief for elements of the team's departmental responsibilities, up to 1 FTE. Some or all members of the team may benefit from this, but in most cases team members

will retain some departmental responsibilities (the main exception being when team members' time is already substantially covered by an external grant).

- iv. It is recognised that some staff may have seen their research plans and activity limited by other professional responsibilities or by personal circumstance. A number of awards will be ringfenced for such staff each year and a separate application process used which will retain the confidentiality of statements relating to personal circumstance (modelled on the REF special circumstances process).
- i. All those funded through this scheme will be expected to produce a short report to the University's Research Committee identifying achievements and explaining how they may have differed from plans. When planned outputs have not been achieved without good reason, the Research Committee may impose a ban of up to 5 years on future applications to this scheme.
- j. The University's equalities officer will produce an annual EIA for Research Committee, which will in turn recommend any changes required to the scheme in order to address ED&I issues.

APPENDIX ONE REF2021 QUALITY DESCRIPTORS

REF2021 assessed the quality of research outputs by reference to their originality, significance and rigour, grading at 5 levels (4* to U). The generic criteria are provided below, but more specific criteria for disciplinary grouping (Main Panels) alongside level descriptors (that is, what 4* looks like etc) is available at https://www.ref.ac.uk/media/1084/ref-2019_02-panel-criteria-and-working-methods.pdf pp.34-38.

REF2021 Generic Criteria for Assessing Output Quality:

191. Originality will be understood as the extent to which the output makes an important and innovative contribution to understanding and knowledge in the field. Research outputs that demonstrate originality may do one or more of the following:
produce and interpret
new empirical findings or new material; engage with new and/or complex problems; develop innovative research methods, methodologies and analytical techniques; show imaginative and creative scope; provide new arguments and/or new forms of expression, formal innovations, interpretations and/or insights; collect and engage with novel types of data; and/or advance theory or the analysis of doctrine, policy or practice, and new forms of expression.
192. Significance will be understood as the extent to which the work has influenced, or has the capacity to influence, knowledge and scholarly thought, or the development and understanding of policy and/or practice.
193. Rigour will be understood as the extent to which the work demonstrates intellectual coherence and integrity, and adopts robust and appropriate concepts, analyses, sources, theories and/or methodologies.