Independent Review of Research Bureaucracy

Interim Report

January 2022

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Foreword

Last March I was appointed by the Government to undertake a system-wide review of research bureaucracy.

Supported by a secretariat team, I have undertaken a range of engagements and evidence gathering to try to understand the issues as seen from different standpoints and experiences across the research system. I am very grateful to all those who have organised or participated in those evidence gathering sessions and who have provided written evidence.

The Terms of Reference for the Review included a commitment to publish interim findings and those are presented here. In doing so, this report presents a summary of the main issues and ideas for changes I have heard through our evidence gathering to date. It also sets out the basis of the next phase of work, where the Review will investigate these ideas in more detail ahead of a final report and recommendations later this year.

Discussions inevitably focused on the role funders play in the system and this is reflected in the content of this interim report. There is more to do, particularly on the drivers of unnecessary bureaucracy and on bureaucracy within institutions, which will be explored in detail over the coming months.

As we work through and build on the ideas in this document we will continue to test ideas at the system level. The true test of this Review and its implementation will be the impact any changes have on those undertaking research.

In the final report, I will identify specific examples where bureaucracy can be reduced and point to broader systemic issues. Addressing some of these will probably require new principles to be agreed and established, and we will need to see cultural changes in the way people work across the research system. This report sets out the principles we are using to inform the Review, including simplification, harmonisation, proportionality and fairness. Making lasting change will require action not just from funders but also researchers, institutions and government. In doing so, we aim to not only reduce unnecessary bureaucracy, but also to improve the quality of the working lives of individuals and teams conducting research.

I look forward to continuing to work with you to build on this initial report to the benefit of our research system and those working in it.

Professor Adam Tickell
Vice-Chancellor, University of Birmingham

Introduction

As set out in the Government's Research and Development Roadmap[1], unnecessary bureaucracy diverts and hampers research, and the work of individual researchers and research teams, and diminishes returns from research funding. It can take too long for funding or approvals decisions to be made and scientists are distracted from doing what they do best: science. Unnecessary bureaucracy constrains the research process, making it risk averse and inefficient. Cutting unnecessary bureaucracy will support a future UK research environment which is more modern, dynamic, diverse and transparent – reinforcing the UK's position as a global science, research and innovation superpower.

Research in the United Kingdom is rightly prized for its innovation, rigour, and high ethical standards. As a source of enormous public benefit and international prestige, it is in everyone's interests that our research system is as productive and agile as possible. To achieve this, we need efficient, effective processes and systems that fulfil vital functions – such as managing security risks, preventing breaches in research ethics, providing accountability for the use of public money, and supplying funders with evidence of the impact of their funds – without creating unnecessary complexity or duplication.

The Independent Review of Research Bureaucracy has been tasked with identifying reforms to the bureaucracy involved in undertaking research that will preserve and enhance the UK's scientific and research strengths, while giving researchers more time to focus on their research. To this end, it has examined the systems and processes most commonly used by researchers, from first applying for a grant through to reporting on the outcomes and impact of the research after it is complete.

This analysis has been based on extensive engagement, meeting with funders, policymakers, institutional leaders, individual researchers, and research teams. These discussions have helped to identify key areas and issues for further investigation, ranging from complex and lengthy application forms to duplications in reporting requirements, and from slow approval processes to a lack of data interoperability between digital platforms.

The Review also launched a call for evidence that received over 250 responses, as well as conducting an international comparator exercise with the help of the Science and Innovation Network in the UK's overseas posts. Although there has been preliminary analysis of these two key sources of evidence, a fuller analysis will inform the final report.

There is a clear perception within the research sector that the bureaucratic burden has increased over time. Processes have been added in response to changes in public priorities, for example the important recent focus on national security under the Trusted Research agenda. However, new requirements are rarely removed once they have served their purpose. As well as identifying specific recommendations, the final report will therefore identify

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[1] UK Research and Development Roadmap, July 2020: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-research-and-development-roadmap

appropriate mechanisms to ensure that we do not see an accretion of bureaucracy in the future.

This interim report sets out the Review's scope, context, and guiding principles, as well as providing a detailed summary of all that we have heard from the sector so far.

This report provides some early ideas regarding potential solutions. It does not, at this stage, set out specific recommendations for change. The main purpose of this interim document is to reflect the evidence that we have gathered so far and to indicate the direction of travel for the last stage of the Review, including areas for deeper investigation.

Scope, Context and Principles

Scope

The Review understands bureaucracy as any activity or process that requires researchers to seek approval from, or submit information to, an external authority in order to advance their work. It also encompasses the uses that the authority in question – whether a university, funding body or government department – makes of that same information. It is not just a question of excess paperwork, but of how the principles and practices that shape our administrative infrastructure affect the ability of researchers to pursue ideas and carry out projects.

The Terms of Reference for this Review are "to advise on a substantial reduction in unnecessary research bureaucracy in government and the wider sector, supporting our researchers to focus on research and related activities which contribute to a healthy research base".

To achieve this, the Review is undertaking a 'whole-system' analysis that covers a wide range of processes and activities including, for example:

- the development, submission and assessment of funding applications
- governance and assurance
- digital research platforms
- project management and reporting.

The Review will make recommendations in each of these areas but will place particular emphasis on initiatives that will reduce the bureaucratic burden on researchers and research teams.

As a UK-wide study, the Review has benefitted from the substantial input of the Devolved Administrations and their agencies, which have devolved roles and responsibilities with regard to R&D and wider skills and education policies.

The future of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) is the subject of a separate review conducted by the Future Research Assessment Programme. However, there has been extensive sharing of data and insights between the two teams.

To date, the Review has focused primarily on Higher Education Institutions but will increase its focus on other research organisations in the second half of the review.

The research undertaken by business, beyond the interface with universities, is out of scope.

Context

The Independent Review of Research Bureaucracy is one of a number of important reviews into the research ecosystem in the UK. The Review team has engaged closely with its counterparts on these projects, which include:

- the Review of the research, development and innovation organisational landscape by Professor Sir Paul Nurse
- UKRI's Simpler and Better Funding programme
- the Research concordats and agreements review carried out by UUK, UKRI and the Wellcome Trust
- the bureaucracy-busting programme being undertaken by the Department of Health and Social Care with the National Institute for Health Research
- the Future Research Assessment Programme currently being carried out by the four UK higher education funding bodies.
- the Scottish Funding Council's Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability
- the Review of UKRI being led by Sir David Grant

The Review will also take account of the objectives and priorities set out in the R&D People and Culture Strategy and the UK Innovation Strategy, both of which were published in July 2021.

The urgent research response to the Covid-19 pandemic has been cited as an example of how things can be undertaken more rapidly and efficiently. Perhaps its most notable features were the reduction in the time required to complete peer review and make decisions on the outcome of applications, the swift dissemination of results through preprint manuscripts, and the acceleration of tasks related to the implementation and administration of grants. Every part of the research system proved agile and imaginative in the face of these unprecedented circumstances, allowing for major scientific breakthroughs.

However, as a national emergency, people across the system were more prepared to go above and beyond, working long hours and prioritising activity over all other tasks. Compressed working models are neither risk-free nor cost neutral, as revealed by Technopolis' recent review of UKRI's response to Covid 19[2]. Given the pressure they place on the whole research workforce, they are also unsustainable. Research proposals need to be appropriately assessed within reasonable timelines unless genuinely urgent and the integrity of the overall research system needs to be maintained (and seen to be maintained). Striking the right balance between the need to maintain quality and the desire for greater efficiency is a challenge for the research system going forward.

[2] 'Process review of UKRI's research and innovation response to Covid 19', September 2021

Principles

In keeping with the Review's remit to "advise on a substantial reduction" in bureaucracy, we will identify requirements that are excessive, ineffective, or simply unnecessary. We will also highlight areas where the aims and circumstances used to justify the introduction of bureaucracy have changed or are no longer applicable. However, the Review's recommendations will not undermine any of the vital functions that bureaucracy performs, such as providing accountability for the use of public funds, managing security risks, ensuring research funding is distributed according to scientific merit, promoting equality, diversity, and inclusion, and offering vital checks and balances in areas of ethical complexity.

One specific example where there is a need for bureaucracy is the Trusted Research agenda, which aims to safeguard the national interest and protect those working on international research collaborations. Responsibility for these risks is shared between individual academics, institutions, and funding partners. We are working closely with those who are putting requirements into place.

As acknowledged in the report published by the Taskforce on Innovation, Growth and Regulatory Reform in May 2021[3], bureaucracy relating to regulation and assurance expands over time – it is gradually augmented as new rules and processes are introduced to address emerging issues, but is rarely pared back. This Review will consider mechanisms for the ongoing monitoring of bureaucracy, so as to guard against the incremental growth of overly burdensome regulations or the retention of requirements that are no longer fit for purpose.

The UK's research funding system is large and complex. In 2020/21, UKRI alone ran 461 separate funding calls, while there are around 150 charities that fund medical and health-related research alone. This breadth contributes to the scope and quality of the UK's world-leading research by providing support for scholars at different stages of their career and from across the disciplinary spectrum. However, excessive complexity risks becoming a source of confusion and delays that impedes research rather than facilitating it.

The Review's "whole-system" approach acknowledges the interdependencies that characterise UK research. In considering the impact of bureaucracy across the funding chain, we will avoid recommending that bureaucracy be moved unless the effect will be to reduce the overall burden significantly. The focus to date has been on the bureaucracy required by funders. The internal systems and processes within institutions and the impact they have on those undertaking research will be explored over the coming months as we work towards the final report.

The impact of bureaucracy differs significantly across the system. For smaller universities, institutes, and public sector research establishments (PSREs) in particular, the growth of bureaucracy presents a major challenge. While it will clearly be impossible to reconcile the aims and needs of every organisation with the obligations imposed by the external research

[3] Taskforce on Innovation, Growth and Regulatory Reform, May 2021: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/taskforce-on-innovation-growth-and-regulatory-reform-independent-report

landscape, the Review has sought to understand the differing and sometimes contrasting perspectives that exist across the system.

As part of the Review, we will examine how suggested changes can be delivered. A key part of this process will be identifying key stakeholders to lead in implementing recommendations and ensuring that overall responsibility for the reduction and subsequent monitoring of bureaucracy is shared across the sector. Finding champions for specific initiatives while also creating platforms for longer-term collaboration will be essential to achieving significant and enduring change.

In addition to these observations that concern the current reality of the UK's research system, the Review's approach is also guided by seven more general principles: harmonisation, simplification, proportionality, flexibility, transparency, fairness, and sustainability. These reflect the numerous discussions at stakeholder engagements and comments received through the Review's call for evidence. They are also already informing action being taken by funders such as UKRI and NIHR to address various issues which are outlined in this document.

Harmonisation

The Review is highlighting ways in which the harmonisation of processes, systems, or resources could improve our research infrastructure. It will prioritise areas where effort is duplicated (for example, where the same information is requested more than once) and where the multiplicity of rules, requirements, or reporting lines inhibits research. It will also examine how the plethora of research-related frameworks, strategies, and concordats within UK higher education could be streamlined and made less burdensome.

As well as reducing the volume of administration, harmonisation and the use of common processes between different funders can make essential work easier. Greater consistency in the management, presentation and interoperability of data could play a more central role in reducing bureaucracy. The same principle applies to the use of language – standard terminology and definitions should be used more frequently, and the creation of common formats and templates should be welcomed.

> Résumé for Researchers was created to support the evaluation of individuals' varied contributions to research, and funders across the sector have committed to adopting this alternative to the traditional CV.

Simplification

As well as consolidating different systems and processes with overlapping remits and functions, the Review will also demonstrate the benefits of simplifying individual processes.

During the first half of the review, we have heard how excessive bureaucracy can be counter-productive or have unintended consequences. At times, the scale of bureaucracy can deter people from pursuing research ideas, while the pressure to comply with assurance-related requirements and the fear of sanction can take primacy over the issues for which the regulations were originally designed. In this way, compliance can become a ‘tick box’ exercise rather than substantive.

Proportionality

Obligations placed on researchers and institutions should be commensurate with the size of the risk or reward. From evidence submitted to the Review team, it is clear that many researchers and research support staff do not currently consider this to be the case.

The Review will look at ways in which bureaucracy can be made more proportionate by making it adjustable. Bureaucracy should support a research environment that blends risk and experimentation with rigour and security. Systems should enable ideas to be proposed and assessed as simply and efficiently as possible whilst maintaining the highest standards of excellence and integrity.

Procurement processes in the public sector may also risk being disproportionately burdensome, slowing the pace of delivery within public laboratories.

Flexibility

Our research system must be able to support and embrace excellence wherever it is found. Overly prescriptive or excessive bureaucracy can stifle innovation by excluding research that does not fit within narrowly defined parameters.

The Review will examine the impact of different approaches to research, which may include targeted or mission-led calls and the specific forms of bureaucracy that they entail, as well as considering the broader role of bureaucracy in determining the balance between direction and flexibility within the funding system. This may include, for example, greater freedom for grant holders to repurpose funding once an award has been made so that they can respond to new opportunities and lines of inquiry when they arise.

The Review will also look at the constraints imposed by year-on-year accounting for funder budgets, which can result in short deadlines for competitive calls that prevent the development of strong proposals and can also limit the scope of institutional allocations such as the Strategic Priorities Fund by making it impossible to support multi-year projects. However, the multi-year settlement for research and development announced in October last year should enable funders to take a different approach.

Transparency

The rationale behind bureaucracy should be made apparent to everyone. Clarity not only makes it easier for people to comply, but also shapes attitudes – researchers and institutions are far more likely to engage constructively with processes if they understand why they are needed. Explaining why bureaucracy exists can also shed light on inefficiencies, such as where the same information is collected by different organisations using parallel processes.

The Review will consider the extent to which information about bureaucracy is shared across the research sector, in particular between universities. This will include communication regarding the collection, management and sharing of data. It will also seek to gauge awareness of the existence of various research-related resources that can help to reduce the bureaucratic burden.

> ORCID provides a persistent digital identifier (an ORCID ID) that individual researchers can own and control, and that distinguishes them from every other researcher.

Fairness

In a fair and equitable research system, merit should be the primary arbiter of success. As well as objective, impartial decision-making, this implies systems and processes that are easily accessible to all.

Bureaucracy can both support and erode fairness. It supplies the data that enables the monitoring of equality, diversity and inclusion, and which funding bodies use to track the distribution of grants and awards. However, it can also entrench inequalities by creating "barriers to entry" that affect some researchers disproportionately.

The Review will examine both sides of this coin. It will look at cases where the impact of bureaucracy is uneven and identify factors that could contribute to these disparities, including institutional resources and support structures, the timing and design of funding calls, and eligibility criteria. However, it will also consider where bureaucracy plays a positive role in supporting fairness.

Our evidence gathering to date suggests that, at times, short or unexpected deadlines (for grant calls) combined with substantial bureaucracy may be leading to some researchers being deterred from applying for grants, with certain groups being affected more than others, such as those less familiar with the system (early career researchers) or those with caring responsibilities.

Sustainability

The UK's research landscape is in constant flux, but any changes we recommend must be sustainable, meaning they should have buy-in across the research system.

To effect lasting change, the Review's recommendations must avoid destabilising the system by prescribing rapid, swingeing cuts to bureaucracy, which would almost certainly be followed by its equally swift return. Any proposals must also be adaptable so that new requirements and priorities can be accommodated. We will look to establish principles which will endure over time, and to set in train collaborative arrangements which underpin delivery.

Summary of Evidence

Between March and October in 2021, the Review team collected wide-ranging evidence on the forms and impact of bureaucracy in the UK research system. This has been obtained through a combination of a call for evidence published in August 2021, a literature review, and meetings with a wide range of stakeholders. We also established two stakeholder groups with which we evaluate progress on the Review - a Challenge Panel, referred to in the Review's Terms of Reference, and a group of funding organisations. Membership of both these groups is listed in Annex A.

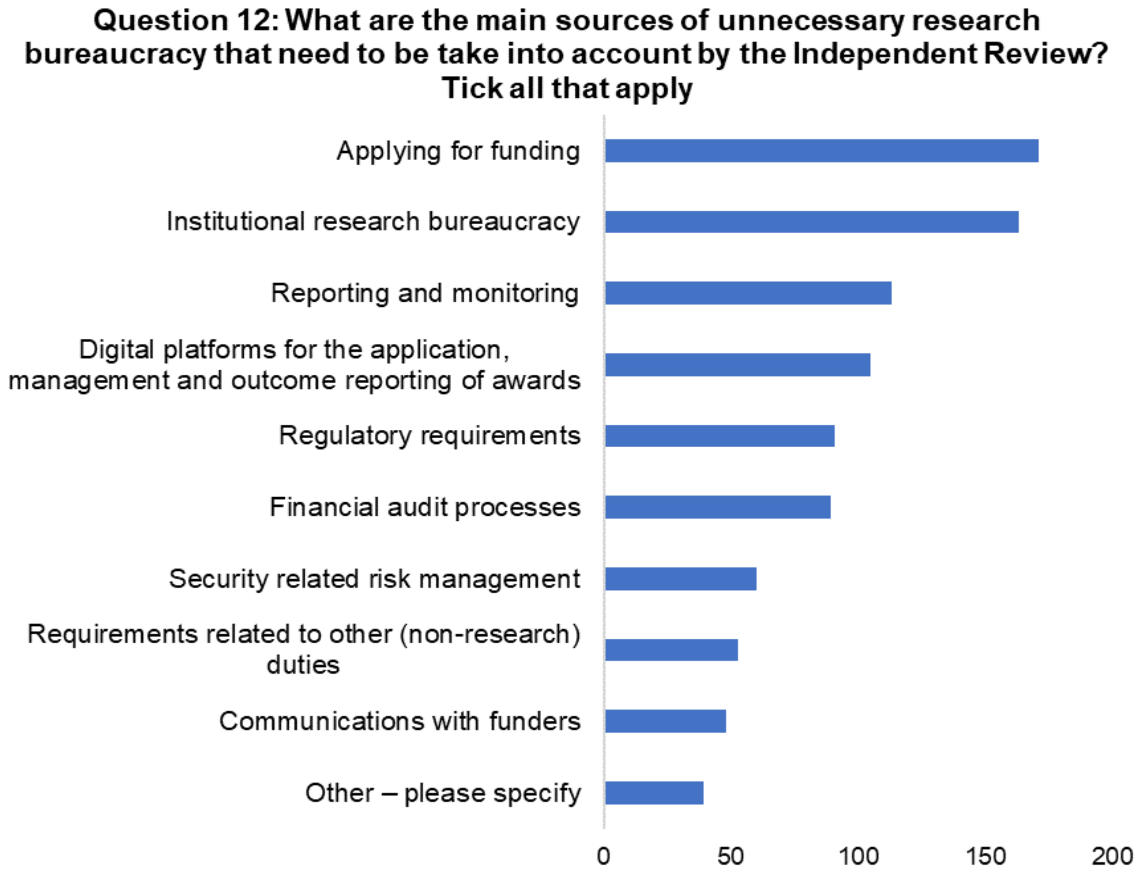
We are grateful to the numerous organisations that have supported in organising roundtables or advertising engagement opportunities to their networks, including:

- Devolved Administrations and higher education funding bodies
- Universities Scotland
- Universities Wales
- Universities UK
- Careers Research and Advisory Centre (CRAC)
- Association of Research Managers and Administrators (ARMA)
- Science Council
- UK Research Staff Association (UKRSA)
- Advance HE
- Russell Group
- UKRI's Early Career Researcher Forum
- Association of Heads of University Administration (AHUA)
- National Institute for Health Research (NIHR)

The call for evidence, which was published in August and closed at the beginning of October, received 253 responses, including 182 individuals and 58 organisations. We received responses from a wide variety of institutions and professions across the UK.

The responses have provided useful quantitative data, including the example below.

From a list of options, 'applying for funding' was most frequently identified as the main source of unnecessary bureaucracy, closely followed by institutional bureaucracy, as can be seen in the following chart



Further analysis of the responses to the call for evidence will be set out in the Review's final report and will help to inform its recommendations, alongside the other evidence gathered since the Review's launch.

Evidence themes

The process has produced a rich set of data and we would like to extend our thanks to all contributors. We have grouped these into six schematic areas, four of which have provided the structure for the first part of the Review's analysis. These are:

- assurance, reporting and monitoring
- the application process
- grant implementation and in-grant management
- improving digital platforms
- communications
- institutional bureaucracy

Within each of the first four categories, a number of key ideas have emerged that will be explored in depth during the second half of the Review period. These suggestions, which are strictly provisional and require further investigation, are presented below. The categories of 'communications' and 'institutional bureaucracy' will require further investigation in the second half of the Review and are not covered in detail here.

Assurance, Reporting and Monitoring

Assurance is the means by which government and funding bodies account for the use of public money, monitor compliance with relevant legislation, support the reproducibility of research, mitigate security-related risks, and ensure that projects maintain the highest standards of ethics and integrity. To this end, universities and research organisations provide a wide range of information on subjects including project finances, data management, due diligence, export control, sponsorship for health and social care research, animal testing licenses and bullying and harassment. This encompasses every stage of the funding lifecycle – from application to post-award reporting – as well as the work undertaken by universities to ensure institutional compliance with concordats and strategic frameworks.

There is a widespread perception that the burden associated with assurance has significantly increased in recent years. The Review will therefore complete a comprehensive analysis such that government, funders, institutions and individual scientists are confident that assurance processes are necessary and proportionate to meet public policy objectives; that data are collected and managed efficiently and effectively; that – in as much as possible – data are collected in a standard format; and that a principle of 'collect once' is adopted.

The review will explore the following areas going forward:

Risk-based assurance

Over the course of many years, universities have developed robust systems and processes to address different assurance requirements. This has been accompanied by, or has perhaps produced, a growing awareness across the sector about the role and importance of assurance. Despite this progress and the opportunities for a more risk-based approach that it suggests, the Review heard that the level of scrutiny has not been reduced. On the contrary, the introduction of new requirements, including those focused on national security, have increased the burden of assurance.

The rapidly evolving research landscape will bring new problems that require close regulatory scrutiny when they first appear. Nevertheless, we will do more work to explore whether and how a risk-based approach might address assurance requirements. This could explore whether periodic assessment of an institution's overall performance might enable reduced project-level assurance. The Review will also consider methods of assurance used in other sectors, such as a mix of risk-based and random sampling approaches.

Standardisation of reporting and monitoring

Funders have similar motives for requesting information about the outcomes of research, but often require the same information to be submitted in differing formats or in multiple locations. We will explore ways in which duplication within reporting efforts could be reduced and reporting requirements could be streamlined and harmonised across funders. We will also reflect on the other complementary activities on reporting and monitoring, such as the Research concordats and agreements review currently underway.

Collective resources

Although certain tasks will inevitably remain project-specific, in many cases it is hugely inefficient for universities to develop their own assurance protocols. It not only duplicates effort, but also prevents the growth and dissemination of knowledge across the sector.

The Review will consider whether collective resources in certain areas would reduce the bureaucratic burden. One potential area that has been raised with the Review team (and which was explored in depth in a report published by ARMA in April 2021[4]) is on due diligence, such as that required for international collaborations. Collective resources should bring improvements in accuracy and efficiency, as well as reducing the duplication that occurs when universities working with the same international partners carry out multiple checks. However, we acknowledge that such initiatives will require funding over the longer term to have impact on the sector.

A further concern is whether universities would regard such resources as capable of satisfying their internal requirements, or if they would eventually revert to their own policies and practices (a question that will be investigated further as part of the 'institutional bureaucracy' work strand).

The Review will explore these issues and seek to identify the potential of shared resources.

[4] Due Diligence in International Research – Options for Improved Efficiency, Equity and Quality, April 2021: https://arma.ac.uk/arma-publishes-findings-of-international-research-due-diligence-report/

Applying for Funding

The overall demand for research funding is high. As a result, the vast majority of applications are unsuccessful. In 2020/21, UKRI's overall success rate was 21%; the average success rate for the Leverhulme Trust's six most popular schemes in 2020 was 18%. For certain funding calls, success rates can be as low as 5%. Many hours of researchers' time are therefore currently devoted to work that will not bear fruit.

The Review will look at ways in which the application process could be simplified in the early stages. In this way, the overall burden on the researcher community may be reduced, with the amount of bureaucracy increasing the closer a researcher gets to securing a grant.

However, the Review will also need to consider the potential for unintended consequences, including the possibility of increased numbers of unsuccessful applications (and therefore simply shifting the burden with little or no reduction in overall bureaucracy). The Review team will seek to work with funding bodies to consider the pros and cons of different approaches in the second half of the Review.

To this end, the Review will examine the feasibility and potential impact of the following proposals:

Optimising application processes e.g. via two stage applications

Funding proposals are often very long. There are good reasons for this: it gives applicants space to present complex arguments and ensures reviewers can make informed judgements. Including detailed explanations of the research's theoretical and methodological approaches in the application also contributes to its reproducibility. However, it is clear that the length of proposals for some schemes is a source of considerable delays at both the application and assessment stage. We must therefore look at whether applications can be shortened or altered without compromising the rigour of the evaluation.

Making more frequent use of two-stage applications may be one solution. Two-stage applications are already used by some funders, albeit in a variety of forms. Some calls (such as the UKRI Future Leaders Fellowship) ask for brief expressions of interest before the submission of the application. These are used to gauge demand and inform the choice of peer reviewers and panel members, but do not contribute to the evaluation.

Other schemes use first-stage applications to conduct an initial sift, with candidates only able to submit full proposals if they are invited to do so. In these cases, the division of work between the first and second stage varies significantly. Some schemes require a full description of the project's themes and activities at the first stage, but only ask for financial information at the second; others request a comparatively short project description and an estimate of the resources at the first stage that provides enough detail for an initial assessment. Both approaches have the advantage of significantly reducing the amount of work required at key points of the process.

Two-stage proposals are not a panacea. They can extend the overall assessment period; they may create an unnecessary extra step (for example, if the majority of first stage bids are deemed competitive and invited to submit full proposals); and they may also require funders to take a different approach, including making initial 'down selection' without use of expert peer review. However, if used judiciously, they have the potential to reduce the vast amount of time and effort consumed by unsuccessful applications. The Review will consider the respective strengths of different models for two-stage proposals and explore potential new approaches with research funding bodies.

Shifting administrative and assurance requirements towards 'post-award' rather than at the point of application

Limiting the content of research proposals to the information required to make funding decisions could significantly shorten application and assessment processes. Much of the detail requested at the point of submission for many schemes – including eligibility or compliance information, data management plans, and even financial figures – not only prolongs the development of the bid, but also distracts reviewers from the quality and originality of the science that should be the basis of their judgement. Moving this information to the award stage (while making the final transfer of funds conditional on its receipt) could significantly reduce the burden on researchers. However, there may be trade-offs, for example on gathering sufficient data upfront on equality, diversity and inclusion considerations or on Trusted Research.

> EPSRC's New Horizons scheme ran in 2020 as a pilot for a streamlined, two-stage application process. For the first stage candidates were only required to submit an anonymised case for support. This not only reduced the amount of work needed to develop the application, but simplified the assessment by asking reviewers to comment solely on the research idea and the methodology. The NERC's Pushing the Frontiers funding call also piloted a streamlined application process based on the 'information at award stage' model: there was a single application stage based on a 7-page case for support, with additional attachments such as the data management plan and justification of resources only requested from successful applicants at the point of award.

Improvements to peer review

Peer review is the bedrock of the excellence of UK science. It advances areas of scientific research as well as the career progression of the individuals taking part. However, it can take time for funding bodies to assess funding applications. For example, 50% of UKRI grants are assessed and awarded within 4 months; 90% are awarded within 7 months. While waiting for the outcome of applications (in which they will typically have committed a significant proportion of their time to the proposed research), researchers are restricted in their ability to pursue other ideas, projects, and collaborations. Reducing the amount of time involved in assessment and/or earlier notification of those applications that will not be funded could therefore increase the overall dynamism and responsiveness of the research system. Reviewers are also researchers – so reducing the wider bureaucratic burden on researchers will reduce the burden on peer reviewers.

Procedures for assessing applications are inextricably linked to other issues included in this report, such as the length, format, and content of the proposals, the simplicity and clarity of guidance documents, and approaches to assurance. However, practices specific to the peer review process impose their own bureaucratic burden.

For each of the Research Councils, multiple requests need to be made to secure a single review (for the MRC it is 4 requests per review, for example). This results in delays that are further compounded by clerical checks that must be completed before the application is sent out for peer review (relating to issues of eligibility, subject remit match, and the formatting of the application documents).

Working with funding bodies, the Review will consider ways in which the assessment process could be made more efficient. Suggestions made during the evidence-gathering process include:

- introducing a triage process (as used by some leading journals including Nature), in which a small panel of expert reviewers is used in the first stage of the assessment process – they could reject applications that are clearly not competitive. This would reduce the burden on the peer reviewers and shorten the amount of time taken to announce outcomes for successful bids. Further work is needed to gauge views on the implications of such an approach to ensure research integrity and quality of the assessment process (real or perceived) is not undermined.
- reducing the complexity of criteria that reviewers are required to assess when reading bids.
- Where possible, sending larger batches of applications to smaller groups of reviewers (for the EPSRC New Horizons scheme, ten applications were sent to the same three reviewers). This would be manageable if the application were shortened and would speed up the panel assessment.

Review of demand management processes

Placing caps on the number of bids that an institution can submit to a given scheme may yield several benefits: it may boost quality, encourage universities to think strategically, and increase the chances of research funding being distributed more evenly. However, it raises complex questions about the allocation of work within the research system: the Review has heard that caps create a major bureaucratic burden for universities, but also that the removal of demand management mechanisms can lead to significant increases in the number of applications being submitted, which presents operational difficulties for funders. It should also be acknowledged that while demand management requires more work from universities at the beginning of the application process, it can also reduce the nugatory effort associated with large numbers of failed applications to schemes with very low success rates.

The Review will work with funders, universities and other research institutions to examine how caps and demand management processes work, considering whether there may be opportunities for caps to be removed or softened.

Simplified guidance and standardised terminology

The research landscape is not easy to navigate, particularly for those at the start of their careers. While complexity cannot be completely eliminated from such a large, multifaceted system, all unnecessary obstacles should be removed.

Guidance documents have been mentioned frequently as a source of confusion during the evidence gathering process, with the use of jargon or ambiguous language and the degree of variation between schemes and funders highlighted as the main difficulties. Simplified and standardised guidance would not only benefit researchers and research offices by providing clarity on the objectives and eligibility criteria of funding calls, but would also help funders by reducing the number of queries they receive, facilitating internal demand management. Where possible, introducing more consistency in guidance, particularly across schemes within the same funder in areas such as equipment funding rates or overhead costs, would significantly reduce complexity.

In the next stage of the Review, we will explore the possibility of creating a cross-funder list of terminology. Using terms consistently across organisations and distinguishing between similar terms such as collaborator and partner in a uniform way would reduce ambiguity and time spent clarifying definitions. A standardized list of terminology would also promote fairness, as the current inconsistency particularly impacts early career researchers and non-native English speakers.

Grant implementation and In-grant Management

Once they have received a grant, researchers must be able to devote their full attention to the science for which they have been funded. Excessive or inefficient bureaucracy can impede the progress of projects, or in the worst-case scenario even bring them to a halt. The Review will examine the possibility and implications of simplifying some of the most common administrative tasks associated with grants, and will also explore whether some tasks could be removed completely.

Contracts and Collaboration agreements

Collaboration is the lifeblood of research. It is also a source of administrative complexity, with the drafting and negotiation of contracts frequently cited as a cause of major delays in the system. This may be particularly true for large grants involving multiple institutions.

While templates for agreements are available, they are not always used. We must determine whether this is due to their no longer being fit for purpose or if universities' caution leads them to rely on their own model agreements. In evaluating the bureaucratic burden of contracts and agreements and looking at ways to reduce it, the Review will also consider the specific issues that stem from working with non-academic partners (both charitable and commercial). This work will need to ensure the protections around international collaborations are not weakened.

Procurement

Procurement is frequently covered in funders' terms and conditions – UKRI, for example, require all equipment purchases exceeding £25,000 excluding VAT to be discussed with professionally qualified procurement staff. This can contribute to the bottleneck that can occur between the award of a grant and the start of a project. The Review will examine the relationship between funders' procurement rules, internal university processes and the timetable for setting up projects, in order to ascertain whether any or all of these could be modified to ease the bureaucracy-induced pressure that can disrupt the early stages of research.

Budget Change Requests

Exploratory research is inherently unpredictable, with multi-year projects often presenting unexpected challenges and opportunities. The financial terms and conditions attached to grants therefore should be sufficiently flexible to allow research teams to respond effectively to unforeseen circumstances by redirecting efforts and resources where appropriate.

While most funders currently allow some changes to be made during the project (by allowing funds to be moved between directly incurred cost headings, for example), the Review will explore whether greater latitude could be given to researchers to make changes after a project has started and consider whether research organisations need to have commensurate checks and balances.

Extensions

It is common for projects to require no-cost extensions. They serve a variety of purposes, such as enabling outputs to be completed or allowing unspent directly incurred funds to be used for engagement and impact activities. At present grant holders must apply for a no-cost extension and explain why it is necessary. The Review will look at where there may be opportunities for the administrative burden associated with no-cost extensions to be lessened or removed.

> The Wellcome Trust are currently exploring the option of building no-cost extensions into grants – while investigators would still need to apply, it would effectively be activating something to which they are already entitled (and they would therefore not need to provide detailed justifications).

Improving Digital Platforms and Systems

Digital infrastructure has a profound influence on the perception and experience of research bureaucracy. It is where bureaucracy's impact is felt most directly by researchers, whether they are submitting an application, accessing guidance documents, or reporting on outcomes.

The ongoing implementation of UKRI's Funding Service provides a unique opportunity to think about how digital platforms can reduce the bureaucratic burden. This thinking must consider the future technological capacity of these platforms (including questions on interfaces, links between different systems, and future-proofing).

The Review team has heard frequently about how digital research systems could be improved. These comments can be summarised in the following six questions, all of which have clear links to other areas of the Review's work and its guiding principles:

- Could the requirement to enter the same information in multiple places be significantly reduced or eliminated (whether this information relates to the applicant's personal details or the proposed project)?
- Could a single portal be used for the application process and in-/post-grant reporting (as is already the case with the Flexi-Grant system used by the national academies)?
- Could there be greater interoperability between universities' internal digital platforms (such as Worktribe) and those used by funders?
- Could there be increased standardisation of processes and requirements across platforms?
- Could extraneous information be stripped out of reporting platforms?
- Could more use be made of digital platforms to reduce the bureaucratic burden associated with issues of regulation and assurance (such as due diligence) by housing shared information repositories?

Communications

Necessary bureaucracy is often considered to be a burden if the reasons for having it are opaque. Our evidence sessions suggest that stakeholders are more content to spend time on administration if they understand why they are being asked to undertake it. We will therefore explore various ways to facilitate improved communication between funders and research institutions and this will be a key area of focus for the remainder of the Review.

Institutional bureaucracy

It has become apparent that there are several changes that research organisations could make within their own processes to reduce unnecessary bureaucracy. These relate to issues such as delays due to the hierarchy of approvals and complex procurement processes. In order to explore institutional bureaucracy in more detail and develop any recommendations, the Review team aims to develop detailed case studies through visits to higher education institutions and research organisations. Through these case studies we will also explore the incentives for change in institutions that have introduced reforms. It will be important to gather a range of evidence, from a diverse mix of institutions in terms of location, size and research intensity for example, in order to ensure that recommendations are identified which can be of benefit to the full spectrum of the UK's research landscape. Institutional bureaucracy, alongside communications, will be a major focus of the next phase of evidence gathering.

Next steps – towards the final report

Before publishing a final report, the Review team will test emerging proposals with a wide range of stakeholders, developing a detailed set of recommendations for delivery.

System-wide testing will also ensure that the final recommendations do not have unintended consequences, either in terms of simply displacing bureaucracy from one part of the system to another or having a disproportionate impact on a particular group.

After developing and testing possible solutions within these work areas over the course of the next few months, the final report will outline recommendations and offer a number of practical suggestions for their implementation. It will highlight where these recommendations align with workstreams already underway within specific funders, such as UKRI's Simpler and Better Funding programme, and set out how bureaucracy can be minimised and held in check after the Review has concluded.

Annexes

Annex A

Challenge panel membership

Name	Position, Organisation
Professor Judith Phillips	Deputy Principal (Research) and Professor of Gerontology, University of Stirling Research Director, UKRI Healthy Ageing Challenge
Professor Kim Graham	Pro Vice-Chancellor Research, Innovation and Enterprise, Cardiff University
Professor Maire O'Neill	Director of Electronics, Communications and Information Technology and Director of the Research Institute in Secure Hardware and Embedded Systems, Queen's University Belfast
Dr Lisa Mooney	Pro Vice-Chancellor for Research and Innovation, Sheffield Hallam University
Dr Kevin Moreton	Chief Operating Officer, Medical Research Council Laboratory of Molecular Biology
Dr Angela Obasi	Senior Clinical Lecturer, Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine
Professor Ibrahim Abubakar	Professor in Infectious Disease Epidemiology and Director of the UCL Institute for Global Health, University College London
Professor John O'Keefe	Professor of Cognitive Neuroscience at The Sainsbury Wellcome Centre, University College London
Dr Clare Taylor	Senior Lecturer in Medical Microbiology in the School of Applied Sciences, Edinburgh Napier University

Professor Marcus Munafo	Professor of Biological Psychology at the School of Experimental Psychology, University of Bristol
Professor Alex Green	Researcher of Neurocircuitry and Consultant Neurosurgeon at the Nuffield Department of Surgical Sciences, University of Oxford
Ms Kelly Vere	Director of Technical Skills and Strategy, University of Nottingham
Dr Tom Bannan	Research Fellow in School of Natural Sciences, University of Manchester
Professor Simon Burgess	Professor of Economics, University of Bristol

Departments and organisations represented on the group of funders

Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy
Government Office for Science
Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office
Ministry of Defence
Department of Health and Social Care/National Institute for Health Research
UK Research and Innovation
Chief Scientist Office, NHS Scotland
Scottish Funding Council
Higher Education Funding Council for Wales
Department for the Economy, Northern Ireland
Wellcome Trust

Association of Medical Research Charities
Alzheimer's Research UK
The Royal Society

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