

Funding for Enterprise and Entrepreneurship Transferable Skills Training for Researchers

In 2007, EPSRC made payments totalling £1.4M to 28 organisations to support training and/or course development in the area of entrepreneurship with the aim of increasing awareness and encouraging innovative approaches to the exploitation of research.

This £1.4M from EPSRC was in addition to the £22M the Research Councils provided to universities for the career development and transferable skills training of the research students and staff funded through grants¹.

In line with reporting on payments for career development and transferable skills training generally, there was a light touch approach to reporting. Universities were asked to describe how this money has been spent within the annual reporting on Roberts Skills Funding to RCUK, due in November. This document provides a brief summary of the main messages from the 2007 reports.

Context

In the announcement of the science budget 2008 and in ministerial speeches, the emphasis on exploitation of research and maximising the benefits gained from excellent research is clear.

The additional funding from EPSRC also addressed a recommendation from the Warry Report² that 'The Research Councils will encourage HEIs to make enterprise training more widely available, using some of the skills funding available to provide business planning, IP management and entrepreneurship skills training'.

"Discovery and innovation in research happen through the creativity of people."

"Britain can only succeed in a rapidly changing world if we develop the skills of our people to the fullest possible extent."

"Innovation will be one of the key drivers of our prosperity in years and decades to come"

Summary

Overall, EPSRC is reassured that funds have been used constructively and for the purpose for which they were intended. It is a small minority of cases where further information or clarification has been requested. Future payments may be affected if reporting is not satisfactory.

Universities used the funding to develop or build on: training in commercialisation of research and intellectual property; role model schemes to better inform researchers' career choices; and, processes for secondments or placements in companies. Reports from universities highlighted that the additional funding catalysed and enabled:

¹ These funds, usually known as Roberts payments because of the role of the influential report "SET for Success" are for training and practices that enable PhD students and postdoctoral researchers to become more effective in research as well as helping their subsequent careers and may include innovative approaches to the exploitation of research.

²Warry Report - <http://www.berr.gov.uk/files/file32802.pdf>

- Scaling up of provision and enhancement of training and activities in this area
- Improving links between transferable skills training and expertise in business schools, enterprise offices etc
- Collaboration across universities to share good practices in developing the entrepreneurial skills and awareness of researchers

Main Messages

Most, although not all, of the reports said that embedding enterprise and entrepreneurial skills in the development of their research staff was part of university strategy.

“Entrepreneurship and the management of innovation is central to [our] mission”

“entrepreneurship, innovation and improved business awareness aligns completely with the university policy for development of researchers”

“Entrepreneurship, innovation and improved business awareness are all part of the University’s strategy for the development of its research staff and students”

[our vision is] “to be an innovative institution that values and encourages the transfer of knowledge and technology to influence and advance economic development regionally, nationally and internationally”

There were, however, a couple of universities where practices relating to entrepreneurship, innovation and business were a new development.

In some cases, the development of support for research students and staff to gain business awareness and new approaches to exploitation of research was linked with long-standing initiatives such as the higher education innovation fund (HEIF), Knowledge Exploitation Fund (KEF) and European funding to promote entrepreneurship.

Building on expertise within the university to strengthen the provisions for researchers was welcomed by EPSRC. Intra-university collaboration was a strong theme and employees with responsibility for staff and graduate training had worked with colleagues from business schools, enterprise offices, research and technology centres etc.

Collaboration with other universities and organisations (such as NESTA) was also a strong theme. Some of the materials being developed, such as web sites and distance learning were being taken forward across more than one university. CRAC, in association with the UK GRAD Programme had also held a

“these themes did not figure very prominently within our framework for researcher development, so the new funding has been a catalyst for major change”

‘It was a great workshop, thought provoking and as always a great pleasure to make new friends from other universities... I certainly came away with many more ideas and better understanding than when I arrived; its already being passed on to my colleagues’

workshop³ to facilitate sharing of good practices and is planning similar in 2008. The response from participants was positive .

As a result of the workshop, a project around 'Exploring intrapreneurship in the university research environment' was developed. This project is being led by a collaboration on nine institutions (Cardiff, Durham, Edinburgh, Manchester, Nottingham, Queen Mary London, Strathclyde, UCL, Warwick) and CRAC, in association with the UK GRAD Programme. The final report for the project will be available in September 2008.

The Database of Practice⁴ now has a broader range of categories, which include "enterprise and innovation related". At the time of writing, there were 55 practices in this category including innovation awards and business plan competitions, postgraduate certificates in business and enterprise, various seminars, speed networking, conferences, mentoring and information on advisory groups.

There were some notes of caution, that whilst embedding enterprise generally aligns well with university strategies and there is a wide range of activities that can be further developed and more of traditional training (eg classroom based) might not be the way forward for all. Some reports included a commitment to review and evaluate existing practices with a view to ensuring programmes are well-balanced and an appropriate mix of provisions such as training, role model schemes and routes to building networks with researchers outside higher education.

"more of the same was not the way forward"

"it has prompted a joined-up and broadened approach to reviewing our offering of enterprise and innovation training"

"The EPSRC funded activities fall under a new university funded enterprise culture initiative"

There was also reference to changing the culture amongst researchers and focus on researcher-led initiatives.

Next Steps

In 2008, EPSRC is providing £2.4M to 51 universities to support the development of user-driven skills in research students and staff, to enable better exploitation of research outputs.

CRAC, in association with the UK GRAD Programme, will be facilitating a session in early May 2008 to explore ideas and opportunities for collaborations in developing support for enterprise skills for researchers. For further information contact ellen.pearce@grad.ac.uk

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³ Full workshop report is at www.grad.ac.uk/nationalpolicy

⁴ The UK GRAD database of practice has been developed as a tool to allow institutions and individuals to describe their practice in all areas related to skills and career development for researchers. It is available at: www.grad.ac.uk/practice