

Historians and Research Leave

Members of Council have been concerned at the impact on historical research of changes and rumoured threats to the [AHRC's Research Leave Scheme](#). This scheme offers funding for 3-4 months to individual researchers in order to complete a project, provided that the researcher's institution offers relief from teaching and other duties both in this period and an equivalent period in the term or semester immediately preceding. Until this year there were two annual funding rounds, in March and September, but the September 2008 round was cancelled as a result of AHRC's review of its funding priorities. The deadline for the next round (for leave starting in or after September 2009) is 5 March 2009.

In order to collect views from as wide a constituency as possible, a questionnaire was devised and sent to 58 History Departments in the UK in June 2008. Heads of School were asked to respond to the following questions:

1. Have members of your department benefited from Research Leave Awards? Have such awards been of special benefit, to them or the Department?
2. Would your colleagues normally receive research leave without application to AHRC? Does your university/school/faculty/department insist on colleagues applying for research leave awards as a condition of granting study leave?
3. Currently, AHRC Research Leave Awards are tied to completion of a project. In your view, is this a problem? Are there other problems with the schemes to which you wish to draw attention?
4. How might the Research Leave Awards Scheme be reformed or modified to make it more effective?
5. How would you rank the Research Leave Scheme in comparison with other schemes available within the Arts and Humanities sector for promoting individual research?
6. Are there other ways besides the Research Leave Award Scheme in which individual research could be supported?
Finally: please give any additional views you have on AHRC funding for individual research.

35 schools/departments responded, with fair geographical coverage of institutions across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. There were responses from post-1992 universities, older and newer provincial universities, Oxford, Cambridge, and London. Many responses were detailed and thoughtful, and not all the points made can be summarised here.

1. Staff in all but two of the responding departments had received Research Leave Awards; in some cases only one or two individuals had done so, in others a number. Many said it had been of significant benefit for both individual recipients and departments, enabling completion and publication, often to the advantage of the RAE submission.
2. Research leave schemes and entitlements vary widely. The majority of responding institutions do not require academics to apply for external funding as a condition of awarding research leave (in some cases because the AHRC Research Leave Scheme criteria would make this requirement unfair) but in

most cases application is strongly encouraged. A significant minority do require academics to apply; in some cases this is the only way research leave can be funded. The importance of the AHRC Research Leave Scheme is that it funds full relief from teaching which not all institutional schemes can do. New universities and those with little QR funding may be particularly dependent on the scheme.

3. A good number of respondents found the completion requirement acceptable, if limiting, and could see its utility, but many also regretted that it excluded early-stage research and hence some applicants. Some felt that the time offered was not long enough for substantial research, and would like to see it extended to cover a full year of research leave, or with more flexibility to match semester and term patterns. A real problem is the timing of the announcement of the awards in the second biannual round – it is almost impossible to fill posts adequately at such short notice. The fact that it was the autumn round that was cancelled was particularly vexing. A single annual round with awards announced in March/April would be preferable.
4. While several respondents felt that the scheme (at least before recent curtailments) was working satisfactorily, many also had suggestions for improvement, of which the most frequent was enlarging the scope to include new projects. Maintaining the level of funding and increasing application success rates were also obviously advocated. Several recommended giving consideration to how the scheme could be particularly targeted to benefit early career researchers and research in post-92 universities. A couple asked for greater transparency in decision-making. Rationalisation of the timing of applications and decisions (see 3) is needed.
5. Despite some criticisms and suggestions for improvement, noted above, the responses here were overwhelmingly in favour of the scheme, rating it ‘very highly’, ‘extremely useful’, ‘invaluable’ ‘absolutely crucial’, ‘by far (or far and away) the most important’. Its especial value to individual research (the lone scholar) was stressed. It was seen as offering wide benefit (to numerous individuals and departments) and excellent value for money. **There is no doubt that the institutions which responded to the questionnaire value the scheme highly and wish it to be maintained in something like its present form.**
6. The range of different recommendations made in response to this question suggests that flexibility and sensitivity to need (which varies by career stage, institution, and area of research) are essential requirements. Attention to the needs of younger academics is widely felt to be important. Several respondents noted small or medium-size grants for individual research as desirable. A recurrent theme was the need to value and support individual research adequately, since this is the predominant model in Arts and Humanities research; promoting themes and strategic areas of research is not popular in this context, and it was frequently reiterated that large collaborative research projects are not the only (or in some cases the best) route to high-quality research output. Many urged AHRC to be more sympathetic to and

defensive of the research practices best suited to the Arts and Humanities sector.

The Society will use these survey results in our discussions with AHRC, and hope that this strong expression of opinion will influence the shape and direction of future research funding. We thank all Heads of School for their time and trouble in responding to the questionnaire.

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Royal Historical Society