

# Latest Developments in Research Council Practice

## NERC / BBSRC / MRC

UKCGE 30 November 2009

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# Introduction

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- Science remits – NERC / BBSRC / MRC
- Common approaches
- Current developments
- Differences ... with reason?
- Some future issues



# Remits

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- **NERC:** Invests around £429M (09-10) in **environmental** research – including marine, polar, atmospheric, earth, terrestrial and freshwater sciences
- **BBSRC:** BBSRC invests around £457M (09-10) in basic and strategic **non-medical life-sciences** and biotechnologies - including agriculture, food, human health and nutrition as well as fundamental cell biology
- **MRC:** The MRC invests around £659M (09-10) across a broad spectrum of **medical research** from more fundamental studies to more applied clinical research



# Remits

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- We work together to ensure that applications for funding for research close to remit boundaries are addressed by the most appropriate Council.
- For example:
  - BBSRC funds human physiology, cell biology, and genetics and genomics research relevant to understanding normal human function
  - but does not fund research focused on specific human diseases and disease processes or abnormal conditions, which fall within the remit of



MRC



- **Delivery Plans for the current CSR Period**

Studentship Funding	Previous (07-08)		2008-09	2009-10	2010-11
NERC	£23.0M		£26.8M	£27.2M	£27.6M
BBSRC	£42.0M		£43.7M	£47.0M	£51.1M
MRC	£42.0M		£42.0M	£42.0M	£43.0M

See NERC, BBSRC and MRC Delivery Plans on web for further info

# NERC, BBSRC and MRC approaches

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- Use of Doctoral Training Grants (DTGs)
  - Devolves greater autonomy to departments
  - Enables flexibility to tailor funding to student / project needs
  - Facilitates joint funding, including inter-disciplinary funding
  - All Councils have agreed to move away from direct student payments as part of convergence for the Shared Service Centre



# NERC, BBSRC and MRC approaches

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- A “dual support” approach
  - Large DTGs for flexibility – to give autonomy to institutions to respond to skills needs, collaborate, tailor to needs of project and student, etc.
  - Smaller number of studentships allocated via directed competitions
- Can be compared to Responsive Mode vs. Initiative funding balance
- See NERC, BBSRC and MRC websites for further info



# Current NERC Developments

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- NERC Training Strategy Review going to Boards early in 2010
- NERC Skills Gaps Review reporting in Spring 2010
- Likely to retain responsive studentships, but with a greater proportion of studentships being targeted to skills gaps
- Studentship opportunities already emerging from the Strategic Science Themes, e.g. technology studentship call
- See NERC Website for further info

# Current BBSRC Developments

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- We are developing a new training initiative 'Advanced Training Partnerships' to help meet high-level and specialist skills needs in agri-food industries.
- This may include the funding of Professional Doctorates (eg AgD), if industry partners wish to see this.
- Formal review of our DTG Quota approach planned for 2010
- This will inform the running of the next call (currently planned for later 2010)

# Current MRC Developments

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- Following a review of the Doctoral Training Grant (DTG) scheme in 2008, MRC this year launched a new **DTG competition**
- The threshold at which research organisations automatically receive a Doctoral Training Grant (DTG) is being raised from the equivalent of 0.5 of a studentship to the equivalent of three studentships.
- Research organisations that fall below this new threshold will no longer receive a DTG automatically and instead will be invited to apply for a DTG through the competition.

# Some Differences

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- BBSRC uses a notional 4-year studentship funding period as standard
- Why does BBSRC retain a competition approach as opposed to an algorithmic allocation of DTGs?
- Why Doesn't BBSRC Fund Studentships on Grants?

# BBSRC's 4-Year Studentships

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- All PhD studentships are 4-year duration
  - 4-year duration allows for broader based, interdisciplinary training
  - This can be a formal 1+3 (but student needs to complete within 4 year total)
  - Or can be a 'standard' PhD with time for broader scientific and professional skill development
- But any DTG approach allows a more flexible approach to PhD duration

# Competition vs Algorithm

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- Why retain a competition approach as opposed to an algorithmic allocation of DTGs?
  - Rewards training quality on a competitive basis
  - Allows periodic monitoring of training provision
  - Helps institutions and departments take a strategic approach to internal allocation of studentships
  - Helps BBSRC drive strategic change in training provision
- But does this increase administrative burden on universities when the 'usual suspects' end up getting all the funding?

# Competition Approach: BBSRC's Core Bioscience Skills



- **The last Quota DTG competition expected PhD Research + 'Core Bioscience Skills '**
  - Mathematical skills
  - Computational and data handling skills
  - Multi-disciplinary approaches to biological systems
  - Public engagement and outreach opportunities
  - Ethical awareness training
  - Awareness of the social context of biological research
  - Commercial awareness
  - Business and management skills
  - Entrepreneurial awareness

# Studentships on Grants

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- Why Doesn't BBSRC Fund Studentships on Grants?
  - Studentship project is a training vehicle and should not be linked too closely to objectives of grant
  - Student needs to have freedom to take project in new directions as the project develops
  - Risk that student becomes a 'pair of hands' on the grant when deadlines for the PI are looming
  - Linking studentships to grant may lead to PI having a student when the department would rather they did not...!
- But does this cause difficulties in meeting the full economic cost of expensive bioscience research?

# Some future issues

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- How to provide PhD students with professional experience
  - BBSRC held a workshop on 16 Sept 09 to discuss the introduction of professional placements for all BBSRC students
  - Pilot planned for 2010
  
- Very high experimental costs in particular areas of research training
  - BBSRC will be partnering with MRC and the British Pharmacological Society to award additional 'Strategic Skills Awards' (launch planned for Dec 09)

# Discussion

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Questions or comments?

