PGR funding in the arts and humanities

AHRC Focal Awards/ Landscape Funding

Context

The AHRC is the major funder for PhDs in the arts and humanities, including languages. In September 2023, the AHRC announced changes to the way in which they fund PhD study. The new schemes launched in November 2023 with students starting in October 2026. Key changes include:

- A 25% reduction in the number of PhD students funded by the AHRC, reducing from 425 to around 300 per year by 2029 to 2030.
- An end to the Doctoral Training Partnership (DTP) model, replaced with 'Landscape Awards' allocated via a formula model. Up to 50 HEIs will receive 1-3 studentships per year over 5 years, beginning in October 2026.
- A re-introduction of Centres for Doctoral Training (CDTs), now known as 'Focal Awards'. The first two themes are 'Arts and humanities for a healthy planet, people and place', and 'Arts and humanities for creative economy'. 5-6 awards in each theme will be funded in the first round, with 20-30 studentships in each over the lifetime of the award.

Allocation of the Landscape Awards

The AHRC have released new details on how the funding formula will function for the landscape awards https://www.ukri.org/what-we-do/developing-people-and-skills/ahrc/training-and-support-within-the-future-doctoral-provision-programme/.

There are two parts to the formula:

1- The first determines how many HEIs in each region are supported (the formula will provide an allocation to HEIs in all 12 UK International Territorial Levels (a terminology which refers to administrative geographies, as explained here). For instance, if 10% of the arts and humanities research students in the UK are in a region, that region would gain 10% of the 50 awards available.
2- The second determines which HEIs in a region are supported, determined by 2 variables: the number of research staff within arts and humanities (as a proxy for research capacity) and AHRC grant income (as a proxy for research quality).

The formula will be run every five years. It will be run in Spring 2024 with successful HEIs informed of outcomes in July 2024.

Allocation of the Focal Awards

The following timeline has been published:

- Final deadline for applications from consortia of HEIs and/or Research Organisations – 2nd July 4pm
- Peer review late July to mid-Jan

- Moderation panel Feb 2025
- Outcomes announced May/June 2025
- Students recruitment June 25-26
- First cohort start Oct 26 4 cohorts full-time or equivalent p/t)

Points of concern

The new schemes raise a number of potentially problematic points for arts and humanities disciplines (including languages):

- Reduced funding (and the possibility of taking a more STEM-focussed approach to at least one of the themes, further limiting arts and humanities funding)
- The possibility of emerging 'cold spots' in arts and humanities funding, depending on whether the Landscape Funding and Focal Awards are awarded.
- Focal Awards may be intended to respond to the issue of cold spots/ uneven distribution of funding. However these awards do not allow for the inclusion of admin costs in the bid, which will favour larger/more research-intensive HEIs who have existing structures which can be leveraged with reduced cost (compared to institutions who would need to start from scratch).
- The focus on existing research success and capacity may enhance structural divides between institutions or regions rather than reduce them.
- The funding is also short term, so it is difficult to build lasting structures - there is no follow-on funding and the theme of the future Focal Awards will be different, meaning collaborations which meet the needs of the existing call may not fit the requirements of future calls.

Future funding – Focal Awards

The AHRC invited suggestions for themes for the next round of doctoral Focal Awards, using the AHRC 'Where Next' questionnaire. This questionnaire closed on 16th April 2024. https://uk.surveymonkey.com/r/AHRC_Where_Next_Submission

UCFL and the ILCS have provided responses drawing on findings produced by the AHRC Future of Languages Research Fellows, which captures the views of the subject area. Their report, entitled 'Research in Languages, Cultures and Societies: Voices of Researchers in the UK' can be found here.