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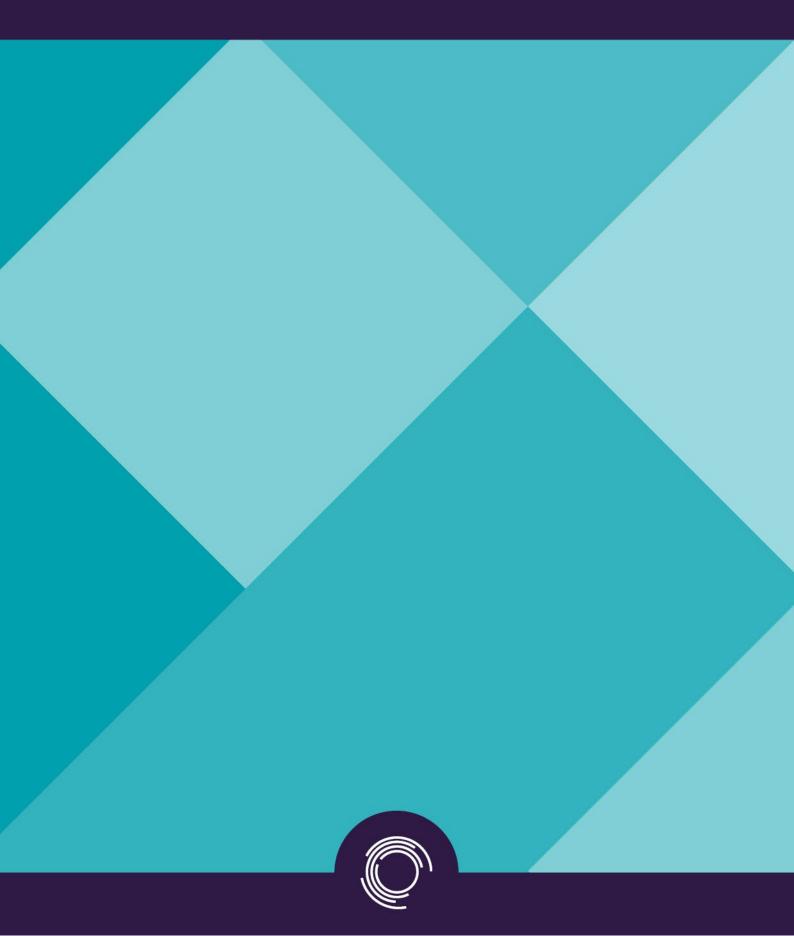
Research Assurance and Accountability Guidance AY 2024-25

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Issue Date:	13 June 2024
Reference:	SFC/GD/09/2024
Summary:	This guidance outlines the steps required to complete a Research Assurance and Accountability (RAA) return for Academic Year (AY) 2024-25.
FAO:	Principals / Board Secretaries of Scotland's universities and the general public.
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Research Assurance and Accountability Guidance AY 2024-25

Introduction

1. This guidance outlines the steps required to complete a Research Assurance and Accountability (RAA) return for Academic Year 2024-25. **The deadline for submission is 31 October 2024.**

2. This return will replace Outcome Agreements in relation to SFC's Research Excellence Grant (REG) and Research Postgraduate Grant (RPG). The Research Assurance and Accountability process will be the key element for monitoring the Research Excellence expectation within the Outcomes Framework (SFC/AN/11/2024). There will be no duplication between the new Outcomes Framework (OF) and Assurance Model (AM) and this RAA process.

Background

3. This work grew out of a commitment in SFC's Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability (June 2021) to increase accountability for the use of SFC research funds, to obtain better evidence on the use of those funds and the value of the investment. Proposals were developed by two working groups: one chaired by Professor Anne Anderson (then a member of SFC's Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee (RKEC)), which focused on REG; and another, co-chaired by Professor Nick Fyfe (RKEC member) and Dr Kay Guccione, Head of Research Culture & Researcher Development, University of Glasgow, which focused on RPG.

4. The approach, for both grants, seeks to fulfil two aims:

   - To provide assurance to SFC that institutions are investing core research grants in line with expectations.

   - To obtain evidence that demonstrates the benefits from this investment, particularly where these align with Scottish Government priorities, thereby supporting the articulation of the national case for sustained investment.

5. A consultation on the proposed approach was issued to universities on 20 November 2023 and discussed at a meeting of Universities Scotland's RKEC on 4 December 2023. Responses were generally welcoming of the concept and supportive of the approach, with comments made on the detail of the proposals and their implementation. These have been taken into account in developing this guidance.

6. We intend this approach to be part of, and contribute to, the joint sector and SFC working that aims to make clear the role and value of SFC's core funding for university research, and to provide an opportunity for institutions to showcase Scottish research excellence. In establishing this process, we do not wish to introduce any further

prescription in how institutions use SFC's core research funding, nor any judgement on how funding is used.

Relationship to broader SFC Outcomes Framework and Assurance Model

Outcomes Framework and Assurance Model AY 2024-25 onwards

7. The Outcomes Framework sets out SFC's expectations of colleges and universities in return for the funding that they receive but does not specify targets or bespoke expectations for each institution.

8. The Outcomes Framework includes the expectation for Research Excellence that institutions produce excellent research that encourages the exploration of new ideas and thinking, advances current knowledge, and has the potential to change the world around us and that the research environment is flourishing, and research students and staff are enabled to succeed.

9. The Assurance Model has two primary elements: *engagement;* and *monitoring*. This Research Assurance and Accountability process will be the key element for monitoring the Research Excellence expectation within the Outcomes Framework.

Outcome Agreements AY 2023-24

10. In order to complete the Outcome Agreements (OA) process for AY 2023-24, SFC has asked colleges and universities to submit a short self-evaluation against the commitments made in their 2023-24 OAs (see SFC/AN/11/2024). This should not include reporting on research outcomes.

11. For the research outcomes in your OA for 2023-24, the self-evaluation reporting should be included as part of this RAA return, rather than the return above (see Annex C).

Arrangements for AY 2024-25

12. We are piloting the JISC online platform to electronically receive the RAA return from each institution. Returns should be completed and submitted by **31 October 2024**. A link will be provided to each institution.

Research Excellence Grant

13. The return for the Research Excellence Grant seeks information on your own governance and assurance processes, on your distribution and use of REG funds and case studies illustrating what has been achieved as a result of your use of REG.

14. REG returns should be submitted on an annual basis. In future years, 'no change from

previous year' will be an option where appropriate in order to minimise duplication and administrative burden on institutions.

15. Further detail is provided in Annex A.

Research Postgraduate Grant

16. The return for the Research Postgraduate Grant (RPG) seeks information on the outcomes sought in your use of RPG, and case studies on its use.

17. The RPG return will be requested annually. In future years, we will also seek an overview of how the funds have been used in the previous year and the progress made towards your defined outcomes i.e. an overview of progress towards AY 2024-25 outcomes will be requested in the AY 2025-26 return.

18. Further detail is provided in Annex B.

Sign-off

19. Returns should be signed off by the Principal or Head of Institution on behalf of the Governing Body.

Webinar

20. We intend to hold a briefing session later in June for staff involved in drafting of institutions' RAA returns. Further details will be circulated shortly.

Added value activities

21. During development of the RAA process proposals were put forward by the sector for activities that would draw further value from the outcome setting and reporting processes. Proposals included an annual sector report published by SFC, a sector workshop and/or a community platform of practice.

22. We are looking further into the practicalities of implementing these proposals and will contact institutions about them separately at a later date.

Institutional feedback

23. We will seek feedback from institutions on the new RAA approach following the first round of returns. We do not intend to make significant changes to the process, but rather allow time for the new approach to bed in. However, we want to be aware of any opportunities for streamlining or improvements.

Further information

24. For further information please contact, email: researchfunding@sfc.ac.uk.

Helen Cross
Director of Research & Innovation

Annex A: Research Excellence Grant

Introduction

1. The Research Excellence Grant (REG) supports activity which generates world-leading research in Scottish universities, ensuring Scotland remains globally competitive and attractive to the best researchers. It provides a long-term, stable source of research funding which institutions can use flexibly to develop and support excellent research as best fits their individual circumstances, thereby supporting the diversity of the sector and their ability to respond to challenges.

2. REG is designed to recognise and reward excellent research and the effective translation of research, and to uphold the principles of the dual support system.

3. In AY 2024-25 SFC will allocate £256.3m to Scottish institutions through REG to support excellent research activity.

4. This reporting template has been developed to provide assurance that REG funding is being spent in line with the desired purposes and conditions of grant, with appropriate accountability mechanisms in place, and to collect evidence demonstrating the role and value of REG in the Scottish research landscape. It is intended to support a partnership between SFC and institutions to showcase Scottish research excellence and how it is contributing to national priorities.

5. Throughout this process we are interested in understanding what REG achieves, rather than simply what the allocation is spent on.

6. Our intention is that the qualitative information provided by universities through this return will be supplemented by quantitative data assembled by SFC from existing sources (notably HESA and TRAC returns). This element will be developed during AY 2024-25. When this set of quantitative data is assembled, we will provide each HEI with the opportunity to provide additional context and comment.

7. The general information provided within the return is for internal SFC use and will not be shared more widely in an identifiable format without prior consent. However, SFC may wish to use case studies for a variety of purposes and audiences, so institutions should clearly identify any case studies which should be treated as confidential.

8. We are conscious that, after the 2024 return, responses to some of the questions in the REG return may not change from year to year. If this is the case, please note "no change from [year] return".

REG Return

9. In AY 2024-25 SFC will allocate £256.3m to Scottish institutions through REG.

Governance and assurance

> In this section we are looking for high-level information on how institutions approve how REG is used and provide themselves with assurance that funding is being spent appropriately.

10. What are the governance arrangements in place to approve the use of the Research Excellence Grant (REG) within your institution? This should include details of (a) where responsibility lies for internal distribution of your institution's REG allocation; (b) how decisions are taken; and (c) the assurance mechanisms in place to ensure appropriate use of REG funding. (Max 300 words).

Uses and value of REG

> Here we are looking for information on how REG is allocated within institutions, what (at a high level) the allocation achieves, and how it underpins central institutional functions and strategic initiatives as a long-term source of funding. Our focus is on what REG does for you; we are not requesting any form of financial reporting on use of the allocation.

11. How, in broad terms, do you distribute REG internally?

    - Allocate fully to schools based on REF results.
    - Allocate mainly (i.e., the largest defined category) to schools (based on REF) but take or receive an allocation for central activity (e.g., cross-institution strategic initiatives and central services).
    - Hold mainly centrally and use for strategic initiatives and/or for central services.
    - Other.

12. What types of activity does REG support within your institution? Please choose the three areas that REG funding mainly supports within your institution. We are aware that decisions may be made at a local level where REG is allocated to Schools; please give an estimation/general answer at an aggregate level.

    - Enabling staff employment.

- Maintaining and/or renewing infrastructure.

- Supporting postgraduate research students.

- Underpinning direct research costs.

- Pump-priming and capacity building.

- Providing funding (including match-funding) for strategic initiatives.

- Supporting centralised research services and/or professional support services.

- Research culture/environment.

- Other.

Please also use the 'Other' text box if you wish to provide further contextual information.

13. If a portion of REG is used to achieve overall cross-institution strategic objectives, describe your approach to using this portion of REG and the rationale or context behind this. (Max 300 words)

Supporting long-term activity

We will use answers to this question (and the REG case studies) to develop our evidence base on the importance of REG as a stable and continuous funding source for research in Scotland. Here we are looking for examples of REG being used for long-term/multi-year investments, whereas the case studies requested below are looking for examples of where a long-term investment has resulted in impact/returns.

14. Highlight any ways in which REG supports long-term/multiyear activity, either centrally or at school level. This may include activities referenced in the previous 'Uses and value of REG' section, which will be developed by drawing on future REG allocations and/or other funding sources. (Max 300 words)

Research environment and culture(s)

In this section we are looking for information on institutions' plans to develop and support positive research environments and cultures, and the role played by REG in their development.

15. How is your institution creating an excellent research environment and positive research culture(s)? Please provide a high-level description of your institution's aims and plans for

this AY, indicating priorities, key highlights and how REG supports this development. We envisage that this may include, but not be limited to, areas such as: promoting open research; valuing a broad range of research outputs, including civic and public engagement; promoting reproducibility; and supporting and empowering research-enabling staff. (Please provide max 300 words on overall strategy and up to 250 words on a specific example).

Concordats

16. We expect that institutions receiving SFC funding meet the requirements of the Research Integrity Concordat and principles of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers.

17. Please provide a link to your institution's most recent annual statement on research integrity on your institution's website.

18. If your institution is a signatory to the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers, please provide a link to your institution's latest annual report. If your institution is not a signatory, please provide a short overview of how the principles of the Concordat are being addressed. (Max 300 words)

Research Excellence Grant (REG) Case Studies

The impact case studies provided in this section will contribute to our evidence base on the importance of undirected core funding to support research in Scotland. We will also draw on these to demonstrate the value and impact of research in Scotland.

We may vary this section slightly in future years to help build a balanced database of case studies. For example, one year we may particularly seek case studies on pump priming, the next on research careers and institutional level activities, the following on AHSS and/or an explicit area of SG priority. This will help us to fill gaps in our evidence base with some regularity and provide clarity on the kind of evidence we are seeking.

19. Please provide two, or more, case studies of up to 500 words each on the use of REG at your institution. These should be suitable for a non-specialist audience, avoiding jargon or excessive acronym use.

20. Case studies should highlight where past use of your institution's REG has resulted in research impact, broadly understood. There is no specified time period for these case studies but examples that show the long-term nature of research investment and impact are particularly valuable.

21. We understand that institutional approaches to use and distribution of REG funding can make it difficult to track impact and capacity back exactly to these sources. Broad uses, for example as core funding for a School or research centre, are acceptable and specificity, where possible, is ideal, for example if it is possible to highlight the level (even approximate) of REG invested. Where possible please also include why REG investment made more sense than another funding source (for example due to the flexibility/agility of REG, its ability to top up the full costs of research projects, its long-term stable nature etc).

22. Impact from research contributes to many national and international challenges and priorities, research by its nature seeks to improve and contribute to the world around us. Case studies should demonstrate how REG has contributed to research impact and, where possible, this should be linked to Scottish Government priorities such as those outlined in the National Performance Framework, the National Strategy for Economic Transformation (NSET), and the National Innovation Strategy.

23. SFC may wish to use case studies for a variety of purposes and audiences and institutions should clearly identify any case studies which should be treated as confidential.

Annex B: Research Postgraduate Grant (RPG)

Introduction

1. In AY 2024-25 SFC will allocate £37.9m to Scottish institutions through RPG.

2. The Research Postgraduate Grant supports institutions to:

   - Invest in a collaborative environment for research training and development that values positive culture, inclusivity and exposure to high-quality research as central to the postgraduate research experience.

   - Secure a pipeline of skilled postgraduate researchers and support their career development in a way that meets the needs of academia, industry and society.

3. The RPG reporting requirements constitute an annual return, to be submitted to SFC by 31 October each year, which will provide accountability for each institution's use of RPG while supporting institutions' autonomy to utilise RPG funds as best fits their individual circumstances and goals.

4. Institutions are asked to provide high-level outcomes, setting out what they intend to achieve in the next year using Research Postgraduate Grant funding. In future years institutions will be asked to provide a brief overview of how they have made use of RPG funding, and to reflect on the progress they have made towards achieving the outcomes set by their institution.

5. Institutions should also submit a case study demonstrating how RPG has been used. SFC will use these case studies to demonstrate the value of RPG and to showcase its impact.

6. The general information provided within the return is for internal use and will not be shared more widely in an identifiable format without prior consent. However, SFC may wish to use case studies for a variety of purposes and audiences and institutions should clearly identify any case studies which should be treated as confidential.

RPG return

Outcomes

7. Institutions should set a **minimum** of two high-level outcomes demonstrating what they intend to achieve in the next year using RPG funding. Institutions receiving £500k of RPG or more per year are encouraged to set a larger number of outcomes.

8. Institutions may choose to set individual outcomes, shared outcomes with one or more other institutions, or a combination of both. Multi-year outcomes would be welcomed.

9. Some uses of RPG funding will be for business-as-usual costs, and the outcomes may reflect this. Where appropriate, outcomes may persist from year to year.

10. We recognise the wide variety of achievements which individual institutions might want to address in setting their outcomes. Input from those in the institution doing PGR development work will help focus the choice.

Retrospective overview

11. In future years institutions will be required to include in their returns a brief overview of how they have made use of RPG funding, and the progress they have made towards achieving the outcomes set by their institution. An overview of progress towards AY 2024-25 outcomes will be requested in the AY 2025-26 return. Reports will be high-level and summative.

Research Postgraduate Grant (RPG) Case Studies

12. Each institution is also asked to provide one, or more, case studies of up to 500 words demonstrating the use of RPG funding in your institution. Case studies should be suitable for a non-specialist audience, avoiding jargon or excessive acronym use. They should demonstrate how the institution has used RPG to support the purposes of the Grant.

13. SFC may wish to use case studies for a variety of purposes and audiences and institutions should clearly identify any case studies which should be treated as confidential.

Annex C: AY 2023-24 Outcome Agreement self-evaluation

1. As noted in the main letter, the previous Outcome Agreement process has been replaced by this RAA return for REG and RPG, and by a new Outcomes Framework and Assurance Model. However, to complete the final cycle of the previous Outcome Agreement process (2023-24) institutions have been asked to return self-evaluations of commitments made in their AY 2023-24 Outcome Agreements. These have been requested in another communication (SFC/AN/11/2024).

2. That report is not expected to include self-evaluation of research outcomes. Self-evaluation of research outcomes should be reported through this Research Assurance and Accountability return.

Self-evaluation of research outcomes for AY 2023-24

3. Institutions are asked to provide a self-evaluation, of no more than 600 words, against the research outcomes in your AY 2023-24 Outcome Agreement as part of the RAA return for AY 2024-25.

4. The format of these reports is flexible and they will not be published. Institutions are encouraged to reflect on how well the ambitions for research set out in the Outcome Agreement for AY 2023-24 have been delivered, identify highlights and challenges from AY 2023-24 and identify any areas for improvement.