

HEFCE 02/16
March
Consultation

Monday 17 June 2002

Overseas Research Students Awards Scheme (ORSAS)

Policy review

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To	Heads of HEFCE-funded higher education institutions Heads of HEFCW-funded higher education institutions Heads of SHEFC-funded higher education institutions Heads of universities in Northern Ireland
Of interest to those responsible for	Research funding; Overseas students
Reference	02/16
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Executive summary

Purpose

1. This consultation seeks views on the operation and effectiveness of the Overseas Research Students Awards Scheme (ORSAS), and the scope and shape of any future scheme.

Key points

2. ORSAS was set up by the four UK funding bodies in 1980-81. Its main purpose is to strengthen the UK research base by attracting the highest quality overseas students to the UK to carry out research.

3. The funding bodies have established a group to review the scheme.

Action required

4. Responses are requested by **Monday 17 June 2002**.

Introduction

5. In 1997 the higher education funding councils for England (HEFCE), Scotland (SHEFC), Wales (HEFCW) and the funding body for Northern Ireland (DEL), in conjunction with other interested bodies, decided to continue the ORSAS following a review of its activities. These funding bodies requested that an evaluation be conducted in 2002 to ensure that the scheme continued to fulfil its purpose of helping to attract the highest quality overseas students to the UK to carry out research.

Review group

6. A review group has been established which includes representatives from Universities UK, the Standing Conference of Principals (SCOP), the ORSAS Committee and the British Council. Membership and terms of reference for the group are at Annex A.

7. The group's remit is:

- ? to advise on the extent to which ORSAS has achieved its objectives
- ? to assess the operation and effectiveness of the scheme overall
- ? to consider the scope and shape of any changes to the scheme if it is to be continued.

8. In parallel to the work of the review group, the funding bodies and Universities UK are examining the administrative arrangements of the scheme. This will take account of responses to question (i) in paragraph 14.

9. A description of the operation of the current scheme is at Annex B.

Background

10. The Overseas Research Students Awards Scheme was established in 1980-81 following an increase in overseas student fees. It was a response to concerns that some of the best students, who would otherwise have come to the UK to conduct their research, might not do so as a result of the new fee regime, thus damaging the nation's research base. Under the scheme, awards to successful students represent the difference between the full-cost overseas tuition fee and that charged to a home or EU postgraduate student.

11. In 2001-02 the scheme offered 1,022 new awards and 1,619 renewals to students previously holding Overseas Research Students (ORS) awards. It is yet unknown how many of these students will actually take up their awards, however the ORS Committee usually works on the premise that around 80 per cent of those offered new awards and over 90 per cent of students applying for renewal of their existing awards will do so. The total number of students supported by new ORSAS awards in 2001-02 will be known for certain in July 2002, but can be estimated at around 850. The total number of new awards each year is subject to a cash limited sum provided by the UK higher education funding councils, and after taking account of the estimated committed expenditure on the awards which will require renewal.

12. Annex B describes the process for making awards. Awards are made purely on the basis of the quality of applicants; no account is taken of their nationality. The main purpose of the scheme is to strengthen and protect the UK research base, not to provide overseas aid.

Issues to be considered

13. The review group are particularly interested to receive evidence on:
- ? whether the scheme is actually attracting students of the highest quality to study in the UK
 - ? whether the operation of the scheme is effective and provides good value for money
 - ? how strong a competitor ORSAS is in an international HE market.
 - ? the destinations of ORSAS graduates.
14. The review group would welcome views on any aspect of the above. It would be particularly helpful if institutions could provide comments on the following issues:

Impact and additionality of ORSAS

- a. Is ORSAS effective in encouraging overseas students to study in the UK?
- b. Is the original policy concern (see paragraph 10) that led to the establishment of the scheme still valid?
- c. What are the destinations of ORSAS graduates? Are they staying in the UK or returning to their home countries?
- d. In your opinion, would successful ORS award holders have undertaken postgraduate study in the UK if the scheme had not existed?
- e. Do the students attracted by ORSAS make a high quality contribution to the UK research base? It would be helpful if institutions could provide evidence to support their response. However, this should only be a summary of existing data that is readily available within the institution. We do not intend to add to the burden on institutions.

Operation and value for money of the scheme

- f. Would the drop-out rate of ORSAS award holders who cannot afford to study in the UK be reduced if ORS awards were increased to include the entire postgraduate fee?
- g. Do you think the ORSAS is an effective way to spend £13 million of public money to attract high quality overseas students and promote UK research?
- h. Should the current system of application be continued, or should we adopt a new system for distributing the funds? Should it be distributed by RAE ratings? By per cent additional research funds? Or other method, please specify.

- i. Do you think the administration of the scheme, as described in Annex B, should be changed in any way?
- j. Do you think the quota system currently in operation, which limits the number of applications each institution puts forward, should be continued in its current form? If no, please specify in what way you would like it amended.
- k. Should new ORSAS awards be available to students to enter the second year of study if they have already successfully completed their first year in the UK? (Students entering their third year of postgraduate study are not generally eligible to apply for a new award.)

Introduction of a flat-rate award

15. In the 1997 review of ORSAS, the issue of differential fee levels was raised in the consultation responses from institutions. Several felt that the introduction of a ceiling value on an award might release additional funding, which would in turn create a greater number of awards.

16. A small number of institutions set their overseas fees at a level that is significantly above or below the norm, with the majority of institutions charging similar fees for similar areas of study.

17. The proposal would be for three standard rates of award to be implemented. There would therefore be standard rates for the arts, science (non-clinical) and clinical sciences. They would be determined each year by the ORSAS Committee and would probably be based on average award levels in these areas.

18. The number of institutions that would be affected by this change would depend on where the award ceiling is set. There are several options for how the shortfall would be funded, in instances where the overseas fee exceeds the award ceiling, and the consultation questions reflect these options.

- a. Do you think the ORS awards should be made on a flat-rate basis, that is, with each award being worth the same amount? If yes then:
 - i. Do you think that institutions charging higher than the flat rate should make up any shortfall between the ORS award and their UK/international fee differential?
 - ii. Do you think that students attending institutions that charge more than the flat rate fee should make up the shortfall between the ORS award and the rest of the international fee?

- iii. Do you think the decision of whether the student or institution funds the shortfall should be left to the discretion of individual higher education institutions?

Potential impact of four-year PhD courses on the ORSAS

19. Since the last review of ORSAS there has been an increase in the numbers of students undertaking four-year PhD courses in the UK. Some of these students have been enrolled on the New Route PhD courses (operating in a number of UK institutions); while others have been following the one-plus-three type courses, which involve a year's research and further subject training before active research is undertaken. These students are not expected to begin their courses with a fully developed research proposal but spend time developing this using their increased knowledge and skills.

20. This increase in numbers of students undertaking four-year PhD courses has two potential impacts on the ORSAS:

- ? ORSAS applicants are expected to have developed a research proposal, and the quality of this represents an element of the assessment criteria.
- ? ORS award holders are allowed to renew their awards twice and therefore be funded for up to three years. A three-year PhD student could be funded for the duration of their course, whereas someone following a four-year course of study could not.

21. We are therefore asking for opinions on the issues presented below:

- a. Should the ORSAS Committee change the assessment criteria for applications wanting to follow four-year PhD courses, making it possible for them to submit applications without research proposals?
- b. Should students with ORS awards following four-year PhD courses be allowed to renew their awards for up to three times (rather than the current maximum of twice) in order to secure ORSAS funding for their entire course?
- c. Do you have any suggestions as to how the ORS Committee could amend the existing selection criteria to allow for the different needs of applicants following a 1+3 or 4-year PhD programme?

Responses

22. The deadline for responses is **Monday 17 June 2002**. Please respond by using the electronic response form on the HEFCE web site under 'Publications', HEFCE 02/16. Alternatively, postal or e-mail submissions can be made to Amy Hayward in the Policy Division of the HEFCE at Northavon House, Coldharbour Lane, BRISTOL, BS16 1QD, e-mail a.hayward@hefce.ac.uk.

Review group – terms of reference and membership

Terms of reference

1. To advise on the extent to which the ORSAS is achieving its original policy objective, that is, to encourage the highest quality overseas research students to attend UK higher education institutions and thus help strengthen the UK research base.
2. To consider the effectiveness and competitiveness of the scheme in a national and international context.
3. To take into account the attitudes of the UK higher education sector when making recommendations to the funding bodies about the future of the scheme.
4. To advise the funding bodies on whether the scheme should be continued, either in its present form, amended, or at all.
5. To advise and make recommendations to the funding bodies based on the above.

Membership

Patricia Ambrose	SCOP
Bahram Bekhradnia	HEFCE (Chair)
Don Bennett	Universities UK (Observer, ORSAS Committee)
Richard Hancock	SHEFC
Amy Hayward	HEFCE (Secretary)
Professor Chris Llewellyn-Smith	University College London
Judy Powell	British Council
John Rushforth	HEFCE
Linda Tiller	HEFCW
Professor David Vandelinde	University of Warwick

Operation of the Overseas Research Students Awards Scheme

1. The scheme operates in two stages:
 - a. Firstly, the ORSAS Committee informs institutions of the maximum number of students they may nominate for awards (the quota).
 - b. Secondly, the academic sub-committees of the ORSAS Committee select, from the students submitted by each institution, those who will be offered the awards.

The quota system

2. The quota methodology changed as a result of the 1992-93 policy review. The review recommended that a model that combined the Beynon formula (a formula which works on the success rate of an individual institution as compared with the national success rate) and the research funding allocations (QR) distributed should in future determine quotas by the funding bodies. The two elements – the historic success rate factor and the share of QR – are currently combined in a relative weighting of 3:2 (success rate to QR share). The quota's methodology is reviewed each year by the ORSAS Committee.

3. The quota model, regardless of the relative weightings which are applied, provides for an allocation of a minimum quota of two for those institutions where the formula calculation leads to a figure of one or zero (this provision currently applies to about 100 institutions). Institutions with a quota of 10 or less are allowed to submit one or two reserve applications additional to their quota. If an institution achieves at least the same number of award offers as their quota they receive an extra quota of one as a bonus.

Selection of award holders

4. Initially candidates submit their ORSAS application to their preferred institution. Institutions then conduct their own internal selection process before submitting supported applications, up to their quota, to the ORSAS Committee.

5. The ORSAS Committee has three academic sub-committees which select the best students for awards. Awards are made solely in accordance with the criteria of 'outstanding merit and research potential'. No other factors are taken into account such as institution, nationality, means or proposed field of study. Each application is marked on the selector's assessment of the candidate's achievement and experience, and the promise of research potential as attested by the referees' reports.

6. The three committees are broadly divided into three subject groupings: arts and social studies; sciences and agriculture; and medicine, engineering and other professions. Each candidate is assessed according to a 16-point scale, 1 being the highest. The basic criteria of achievement and research potential are marked separately and the combination of the two marks determines the final grading.

Demand for awards

7. Demand for awards has steadily increased: in 2001-02 approximately 5,500 applications were received by institutions compared to 5,000 in 2000-01 and 4,500 in 1995-96 (the last time the scheme was reviewed). Applications from women have grown from 34 per cent in 1995-96 to 44 per cent in 2001-02. The success rate of women in 2001 was also 44 per cent (a rise of 3 per cent on 2000).

8. Applications in 2001 came from 100 different countries. Those with 50 or more successful applications were China, US, Canada, India, Malaysia and Australia. This is largely similar to the profile in 1995-96 except that Malaysia has replaced Singapore in the list.

9. Students applying from overseas make up around 47 per cent of the total number of applicants. This proportion has risen slightly since the last review, meaning that similar numbers of students are applying for ORS awards that are already resident in the UK or resident outside the EU. The success rate in 2001 of applicants from overseas was slightly higher than that of applicants already in the UK (69.5 per cent to 64.6 per cent).

Quality of applicants

10. On the evidence of the 2001 competition, the quality of applicants has continued to rise. From a total of 1,528 applications submitted by the institutions to the ORSAS Committee, 506 fell below the qualifying threshold for awards (this year, between 5.0 and 5.75 points). The overall quality of the applicants can be measured by the fact that the cut-off point has moved from 6/7 points in 1999-2000 to 5/6 in 2001-02.

Distribution of awards

11. Annex C shows the awards offered in 2001 (we do not yet know what the take-up is going to be), analysed by institution.

Completion of degrees

12. The ORSAS Committee agreed 15 years ago to set up a survey of the success of students with ORS awards in higher degree courses. The results can be compared with published statistics on submission rates of PhD theses by students who receive Research Council postgraduate awards. More recently, the figures have been published in a report from the Office of Science and Technology. Table 1 below gives the results of the 2001 survey of the 1996 cohort of successful award holders. The 2000 survey results are included as a comparison.

Table 1 2001 survey of the 1996 cohort of successful award holders

	2001 survey	2000 survey
Successful candidates	571 (68.5%)	68.4%
Thesis submitted but not yet examined	54 (6.5%)	6.7%
Thesis not yet submitted	164 (19.7%)	18.4%
Unsuccessful candidates	2 (0.2%)	0%
Withdrawal before completion of course	43 (5.2%)	6.5%

13. The submission and completion rates of ORS award holders can be compared with the summary four-year PhD completion rates for the UK Research Councils, shown in Table 2. Numbers are drawn from students who gained their awards in 1996.

Table 2 Submission of completed PhDs by students supported by the UK Research Councils

Research Council/Board	Submission rate
Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council	86%
Economic & Social Research Council	76%
Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (1995 starters)	80%
Natural Environment Research Council (1995 starters)	78%
Medical Research Council (1994 starters)	72%
Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council	84%
Arts and Humanities Research Board	70%

2001 ORSAS applications and awards in the UK, by institution

Institution	Number of applicants	Awards offered
University of Aberdeen	11	9
University of Abertay Dundee	1	0
University of Wales Aberystwyth	9	4
Aston University	7	4
University of Wales Bangor	5	1
University of Bath	16	14
Queen's University of Belfast	14	5
University of Birmingham	44	37
Bournemouth University	3	1
University of Bradford	9	4
University of Brighton	2	1
University of Bristol	33	29
Brunel University	10	6
Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College	4	0
University of Cambridge	162	127
University of Wales Cardiff	20	7
University of Wales Institute, Cardiff	2	0
University of Central England	2	0
University of Central Lancashire	4	4
University of Gloucestershire	3	2
University College Chichester	2	0
City University	6	3
Coventry University	2	0
Cranfield University	9	5
Dartington College of Arts	1	0
De Montfort University	5	1
University of Derby	2	0
University of Dundee	12	6
University of Durham	15	12
University of East Anglia	11	7
University of East London	1	1
University of Edinburgh	52	41
University of Essex	11	8
University of Exeter	11	6
University of Glamorgan	4	1
Glasgow Caledonian University	2	2
Glasgow School of Art	2	1
University of Greenwich	2	1
Heriot-Watt University	12	10
University of Hertfordshire	5	0

University of Huddersfield	3	1
University of Hull	8	4
University of Keele	7	1
University of Kent at Canterbury	10	2
King Alfred's College	1	0
University of Kingston	4	2
University of Wales Lampeter	1	1
Lancaster University	13	9
University of Leeds	45	37
Leeds Metropolitan University	2	0
University of Leicester	12	6
University of Lincoln	1	0
University of Liverpool	24	20
Liverpool John Moores University	5	2
The London Institute	2	1
University of Loughborough	11	6
University of Luton	2	0
University of Manchester	44	36
UMIST	30	28
Manchester Metropolitan University	5	1
Napier University	3	0
University of Newcastle	25	13
University of North London	4	0
University of Northumbria at Newcastle	1	0
University of Nottingham	24	17
Nottingham Trent University	4	3
Open University	4	1
University of Oxford	132	116
Oxford Brookes University	2	1
University of Paisley	3	0
University of Plymouth	6	1
University of Portsmouth	5	1
University of Reading	15	3
Robert Gordon University	4	1
Royal College of Art	3	1
Royal College of Music	1	0
Royal Scottish Academy of Music & Drama	1	1
St Andrews University	11	7
St Marys College, Twickenham	1	0
University of Salford	10	7
University of Sheffield	37	22
Sheffield Hallam University	4	0
University of South Bank	4	2
University of Southampton	29	20
Southampton Institute	1	0

University of Stirling	5	2
University of Strathclyde	19	17
University of Sunderland	4	0
University of Surrey	18	15
University of Surrey Roehampton	1	0
University of Sussex	18	11
University of Wales Swansea	10	4
University of Teeside	3	0
University of Ulster	10	1
University of Wales College of Medicine	1	0
University of Warwick	24	21
University of the West of England	4	0
University of Westminster	4	2
University of Wolverhampton	3	1
University of York	12	9
London		
Birkbeck College	11	9
Goldsmiths College	8	7
Imperial College of Science Technology and Medicine	61	48
King's College	35	20
London School of Economics and Political Science	14	12
Queen Mary	12	2
Royal Academy of Music	4	3
Royal Holloway	12	6
School of Oriental and African Studies	11	9
University College London	69	52
Institutes		
Courtauld Institute	5	2
Institute of Advanced Legal Studies	1	0
Institute of Cancer Research	1	0
Institute of Education	8	3
Institute of Latin American Studies	1	0
Warburg Institute	1	0
Medical schools		
London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine	7	4
Royal Veterinary College	1	0
School of Pharmacy	5	2
Total	1,528	1,022

List of abbreviations

DEL	Department for Employment and Learning (Northern Ireland)
EU	European Union
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEFCW	Higher Education Funding Council for Wales
ORS	Overseas Research Students
ORSAS	Overseas Research Students Awards Scheme
QR	Quality-related research funding
SCOP	Standing Conference of Principals
SHEFC	Scottish Higher Education Funding Council