

Recurrent Research Funding Across the United Kingdom

*The landscape in the four devolved
administrations*

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This paper was originally written to support a discussion that took place within the Higher Education Policy Development Group (HEPDG), a committee at the British Academy that is made up of both internal and external stakeholders. This is not a formal governance group and as such does not necessarily reflect the official position of the Academy.

The overall focus of the meeting was on research funding in UK higher education, with a section of the meeting specifically concentrating on quality related recurrent research funding, sometimes known as QR (Quality-Related) funding. Members of the committee reflected on the value of recurrent research funding to institutions in the UK as well as differences in its allocation across the four nations.

The first section of this paper outlines the widely recognised value of recurrent research funding as part of the landscape of UK higher education and its particular importance to the SHAPE (Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts for People and the Economy) disciplines. The second section outlines the different ways recurrent research funding is administered across the UK and explores recent trends in the level of funding allocations in each nation. The final section comparatively examines recent changes to recurrent research funding allocations across the four nations, as well as relative levels of recurrent funding to wider research and innovation budgets.

The role of recurrent research funding

What is recurrent research funding?

Recurrent research funding forms part of the overall public research funding provided to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the UK under what is generally known as the “dual support system”.¹ Broadly speaking, this system is made up of, on the one hand, project-specific grants awarded through a competitive process of peer review by research councils, and on the other, recurrent research funding delivered to institutions from government via research funding bodies.²

In this briefing, the focus will be on the element of recurrent research funding provided via block grants and allocated by formula to individual HEIs, according primarily to research assessment (specifically, the results of the Research Excellence Framework (REF), the central research assessment exercise in the UK, are used to determine levels of funding to each HEI). This is referred to in some administrations as Quality-Related (QR) funding. This paper will at times use the term QR as a shorthand to refer to this element of recurrent research funding, for example when discussing only the administrations that use this term, as well as literature that has used it. It is important to note that other types of recurrent funding are distributed across the four administrations, include funding for capital and for knowledge exchange (for example in England, the Research Capital Investment Fund and the Higher Education Innovation Fund).³ As this briefing is focused on highlighting the role of primarily quality-related recurrent research funding, these streams are outside the scope of this briefing and are not included in our analysis of changes to funding levels.

As education is devolved, recurrent research funding operates slightly differently across the UK and its allocation is administered by four separate bodies in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. However, there are sufficient similarities between the funding mechanisms of the devolved administrations that it is possible to discuss recurrent research funding on a UK-wide basis. Arguably, the key unifying factor is the ‘quality-related’ nature of the majority of funding. Across all four administrations, the results of the REF – the UK-wide exercise which assesses the quality of research through a process of peer-review – are entered into a formula which is used to allocate funding to different HEIs.

Definitions

At the outset, it is important to reiterate what this paper means by recurrent research funding, particularly in its relation to the common term QR. There is no ‘official’ definition of QR funding, with the result that the term can often be used somewhat loosely within the higher education (HE) sector. While the next section of this paper goes into further detail about how recurrent research funding is calculated and distributed in each administration, it is useful to outline the broad approach used in this briefing. This approach is to follow each

¹ UKRI (2023) *Explainer: dual support funding for research and innovation*, [accessed 15 November 2023].

² Research councils are the disciplinary-specific organisations that provide competitive research grants in the UK, including the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) for example. Research funding bodies are the organisations that deliver recurrent research funding, for example the Scottish Funding Council (SFC).

³ Research England (2020) *How we fund higher education providers*, [accessed 7 May 2024].

administration's individual methodology in recording levels of quality-related recurrent research funding, rather than imposing a unifying definition that may be more consistent across different administrations but would less accurately reflect individual practices.

To give a specific example, the relative size of England and of the English HE sector within the wider UK context means that the allocation of what is known in England as QR funding can dominate discussions. However, the way that Research England, which distributes QR to English HEIs, defines 'QR funding' differs slightly from bodies in other devolved administrations. For example, in England the 'QR research degree programme supervision fund', allocated to help HEIs meet the costs of supervising postgraduate researchers, is recorded as part of its overall QR funding.⁴ However, in Scotland, the Research Postgraduate Grant, which supports training for postgraduate research students, is recorded separately to the Research Excellence Grant, which fulfils an equivalent role to QR in Scotland.⁵

This example is cited to illustrate the point that this paper does not seek to present the recurrent research funding allocated in different devolved administrations as representing exactly equivalent systems, that can be compared like-for-like. Instead, the intention is to focus on both similarities and differences between the four devolved administrations to help draw further light on the role of this funding across the UK.

Why is recurrent research funding valued by the HE Sector?

It is widely considered that there are many benefits to recurrent research funding, which mean it is highly valued by the HE sector. Such funding is generally allocated annually on an academic year basis, providing relative certainty to budgets, and allowing HEIs to direct funds towards core activities, such as salaries and other ongoing costs, that maintain their overall research infrastructure. Indeed, QR funding has been described as "the invisible force holding up the UK's research ecosystem".⁶ This also reflects the important role this funding plays in supporting training and development for Early Career Researchers (ECRs) and doctoral students, which helps to safeguard the pipeline of new researchers entering the HE sector.

Furthermore, most recurrent research funding is non-hypothecated, meaning that HEIs have considerable autonomy to spend this income according to their own priorities and they do not have to justify or account for the detail of spending.⁷ This provides HEIs with valuable flexibility and greater control over their spending priorities. This also enables an element of cross-subsidy, with HEIs able to employ such funding alongside other income streams for purposes that they deem strategically important. The income provided by recurrent research funding provides HEIs with available resources to draw on to produce rapid response research when new priorities emerge, for example in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, when HEIs were able to redeploy researchers towards pandemic-related work using existing funding, rather than having to spend time applying for new grants.⁸

It is also the case that recurrent funding can help to leverage further research income from other sources, including research funding councils and private investors. Generally, this funding is seen as providing a solid financial base for research, which can make further investment more attractive and therefore improve the chances of success for grant funding bids.⁹ This can also be particularly useful in supporting interdisciplinary research, which may be at risk of missing out on grant funding from research councils due to falling between the remit of different bodies.¹⁰

⁴ UKRI (2024) *Research England Funds for Research and Knowledge Exchange*, [accessed 20 March 2024].

⁵ SFC (2023) *Research Funding*, [accessed 3 September 2023].

⁶ Smith, S. (2019) *Why we need QR funding*, Russell Group, [accessed 6 November 2023].

⁷ UKRI (2023) *Specific guidance to UKRI, from DSIT, regarding the operation of Research England for 2023-2024* [accessed 22 March 2024].

⁸ Russell Group (2021) *Supporting future breakthroughs and improved resilience for the UK: the importance of 'QR' funding*, [accessed 22 March 2024].

⁹ Russell Group (2021) *Underpinning our world-class research base – the importance of QR funding*, [accessed 22 March 2024].

¹⁰ UCL (2019), *The Impact of QR Funding for UK Research* [accessed 8 November 2023].

Recurrent funding can also help make up the shortfalls related to the Full Economic Cost (fEC) of research. Full Economic Cost, or fEC, refers to the full cost to a HEI of undertaking a particular research activity. If a grant is awarded, research councils will typically provide funding at 80% of the fEC.¹¹ However, grants from research councils are representing an increasingly smaller proportion of fEC due to the wider economic climate, with recent data suggesting universities are now on average recovering less than 70% of fEC.¹² While concerning for the sector, and it is important to note that it is not a sustainable solution, HEIs may use recurrent funding to plug the gaps.

It is generally agreed within the sector that a balance of funding streams is necessary to maintain a healthy ecosystem for excellent research, with the focus of a significant section of recurrent research funding on 'quality' via research assessment being a key part of this. Consensus amongst UK academics from across the disciplines is that having access to a reliable source of funding that is determined entirely by peer review, with no further restrictions imposed, is of considerable value to the sector.

Why is recurrent research funding important to SHAPE disciplines?

While researchers of all disciplines tend to value recurrent research funding as a source of stable, regular support, it is particularly valuable to the SHAPE (Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts for People and the Economy) disciplines. A recent Bennett Institute report found that in disciplines where research expenses – beyond those of researcher salaries and basic infrastructure – are low, including more theory-based subjects, QR has an especially crucial role in reducing the pressure to source external funding.¹³ While not exclusively, this category includes many SHAPE subjects.

It is also important to highlight that recurrent funding plays a key role in subjects in the humanities and social sciences for which researchers' time is the most important resource needed to support the production of research. The use of recurrent funding by HEIs to provide small grants to SHAPE researchers, often working individually, that help facilitate travel to, and time spent in, archives, libraries and field sites can make a considerable positive impact on the success of research projects.

In addition, recurrent research funding is ideally placed to support disciplines whose knowledge generation may be less likely to attract private investment, generally because its path to commercialisation is less linear. Regardless, such research has immense social and cultural value and recurrent funding plays a key role in supporting academic work in these areas, as demonstrated by a recent British Academy and Academy of Social Sciences report on REF impact case studies.¹⁴ This is reinforced by the role of recurrent funding in redressing the balance in the dual support system: SHAPE research is typically less well-served by competitive grants, partly due to discrepancies between the budgets of different research councils, and the dearth of private, charitable research funds more common in, for example, health research.¹⁵

Finally, the security of recurrent research funding also provides researchers with the freedom to take risks and pursue uncertain avenues of enquiry, beyond the confines of a fixed award with set parameters. While clearly this also benefits researchers in experimental STEM fields, the intangible and open-ended nature of many SHAPE disciplines means that recurrent funding plays a key role in supporting ground-breaking and novel SHAPE research.

¹¹ UKRI (2021) *Principles of full economic costing (fEC)*, [accessed 22 March 2024].

¹² Coe, J. (2023) 'University funding is driving the research funding deficit', *WonkHE*, [accessed 22 March 2024].

¹³ Ioppolo, B. & Wooding, S. (2021), *Exploring the value of QR in supporting researcher-scale activities: Development of methods and a case study of the University of Cambridge*, Bennett Institute for Public Policy, University of Cambridge. [accessed 22 May 2024]

¹⁴ British Academy & The Academy of Social Sciences (2024), *The SHAPE of Research Impact*, [accessed 16 April 2024].

¹⁵ UCL (2019) *The Impact of QR Funding for UK Research*, [accessed 8 November 2023].

While, for the reasons outlined above, recurrent research funding is highly valued by the SHAPE disciplines, there is an evidence gap in terms of tracking how exactly this funding is spent within institutions and across the sector. More research in this area, aimed at producing empirical evidence of the return on investment of recurrent research funding in the SHAPE disciplines, would help strengthen the arguments outlined above, despite the clear difficulties present in tracking how this kind of funding is spent. This was highlighted in the recent Nurse review of the research landscape, which noted that “opacities in how QR is spent by universities” has made “tracing its uses at an individual university level challenging”.¹⁶ While there is a need to be mindful not to increase the reporting requirements on university staff already contending with heavy workloads, it would nonetheless strengthen the case for the importance of recurrent research funding in the long run if the sector and the SHAPE disciplines in particular were able to draw on empirical evidence of its impact.

¹⁶ Nurse, P. (2023), *Independent Review of the UK's Research, Development and Innovation Organisational Landscape*, pp. 41 [accessed 7 May 2024]

The Four Nations and recurrent research funding

England

In England, quality-related recurrent research funding takes the form of ‘QR funding’, allocated annually to HEIs by Research England, the successor to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), responsible since 2018 for distributing funding as part of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI).¹⁷ QR funding is split into five elements, including ‘mainstream’ QR, the QR research degree programme (RDP) supervision fund; the QR charity support fund, the QR business research element; and QR funding for National Research Libraries.

The mainstream QR element comprises around two-thirds of Research England’s total QR funding.¹⁸ Through this funding, allocated by formula, Research England aims to target research excellence, as determined by the REF. As well as quality, the formula for the distribution of funding is also informed by research volume, the relative costs of research in different subject areas and a London weighting.¹⁹ While the level of QR is determined by assessments of excellence within disciplines and institutions, it is delivered to the institutions themselves, who then distribute it internally.

Research England’s total QR funding allocation increased by 25% from 2018-19 to 2023-24. Notably, the academic year 2022-23, the first in which QR funding was informed by the results of REF 2021, saw a considerable funding increase of 13%, compared to a 7% increase in the previous academic year.²⁰ This was announced as part of a larger funding package for UKRI based on the Government’s commitment to increase public investment in R&D by 2027. However, it should be noted for further context, that prior to this announcement there had been an almost 13% real-terms decline in QR funding in England from the years 2010-11 through to 2017-18.²¹

Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, HEIs are funded through the higher education division of the Department for the Economy. The Department for the Economy uses the REF to allocate quality-related recurrent research funding, known as in England as QR funding. This is calculated based on research quality, the number of active researchers working in institutions and a subject-cost weighting.²²

Northern Irish HEIs can also benefit from a ‘QR Quality pot’ introduced in 2012-13. This provides a £250,000 or £125,000 fixed funding allocation for subjects which are STEM-related and for those non-STEM subjects deemed to be in areas of economic relevance by meeting priority skills needs.²³ In 2022-23, these included Geography and Environmental Studies; Archaeology; and

¹⁷ Research England (2023) *Who Research England is*, UKRI, [accessed 8 November 2023].

¹⁸ Research England (2023) *How we fund higher education providers*, UKRI, [accessed 3 September 2023].

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Research England (2023) *Research England grant allocations to HEPs 2023 to 2024*, UKRI, [November 2023].

²¹ Smith, S. (2019), *Why we need QR funding*, Russell Group, [accessed 6 November 2023].

²² Though the Department for the Economy: Higher education division note that they use the REF to assess quality of research and the number of FTE research staff in order to allocate QR funding, Times Higher Education have asserted that performance in the REF is not tied to QR funding in Northern Ireland: Jack, P. (2023), ‘Northern Irish universities “in limbo” after year of no government’, *Times Higher Education*, [September 2023].

²³ Northern Irish Government (2021) *Higher Education Quality-related Research (QR) funding*, [accessed 3 September 2023].

creative subjects, including Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory; Music, Drama, Dance, Performing Arts, Film and Screen Studies; and Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management.²⁴

HE in Northern Ireland was impacted by the collapse of the Northern Irish Assembly and the devolved government in February 2022. Prior to this the Northern Irish Government had pledged a full review of higher education, which was delayed.²⁵ The recent resumption of devolved government in Northern Ireland may lead to this matter being revisited. Information is only available publicly up to the 2022-23 academic year, with the level of annual QR funding allocated consistent at around £46 million in the previous four academic years.²⁶

Scotland

In Scotland, the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) provides HEIs with funding for: teaching and learning; research and innovation; skills and economic transformation; widening access; and capital investment. The Research Excellence Grant (REG) provides the quality-based recurrent research funding element of the SFC's research and innovation funding.²⁷

The REG is allocated based on a formula, where 70% is weighted towards 'quality', determined using the results of the REF. The remaining 30% is allocated as a contribution towards meeting the fEC of both UKRI and other competitively funded grants, and charity funded research. Both latter elements are awarded in proportion to the amount of research income each institution receives in relation to Scotland's total research income.²⁸ This aspect of research funding in Scotland is notable, because it ties the level of a significant section of recurrent research funding to that of research council spending, removing some of the discretionary element and bridging the gap between the two strands of the dual support system. In a recent SFC report, the REG was described as the "bedrock of university research" in Scotland.²⁹

In 2021 the SFC reviewed the REG, including running a consultation of the sector, resulting in a refining of the REG principles. Some changes included the removal of a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Medicine) premium, changes to subject and quality weightings, and amendments to funding allocations. The SFC also revealed that the 2021 REF results would have had a significant impact on universities' REG allocations. As a result, the SFC had decided to limit the reduction in REG any institution would receive, for the 2022-23 academic year only, to provide stability.³⁰ Overall recurrent research funding in Scotland has been subject to minor fluctuations since 2018-19, with a net increase of 2% to the REG over this period.³¹

Wales

In Wales, research funding is currently administered by the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW). The Welsh Government has established that HEFCW will be replaced by a new body, the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (CTER), which will additionally have responsibility for Further Education, from August 2024.³² Funding already announced by HEFCW for the academic year 2023-24 extends beyond the handover date, however it is anticipated that the new CTER will honour these existing commitments.

²⁴ Northern Irish Government (2023) *University recurrent research grant summary tables*, [accessed 1 March 2024].

²⁵ Jack, "Northern Irish universities "in limbo".

²⁶ Northern Irish Government (2021) *Higher Education Quality-related Research (QR) funding*, [accessed 3 September 2023].

²⁷ SFC (2023) *Research Funding*, [accessed 3 September 2023].

²⁸ SFC (2023) *Research Excellence Grant Allocation Model*, [accessed 3 September 2023].

²⁹ SFC (2023) *The Bedrock of University Research: SFC's Research Excellence Grant*, [accessed 10 November 2023].

³⁰ SFC (2023) *Research Funding*, [accessed 3 September 2023].

³¹ SFC (2023) *University Final Funding Allocations AY 2023-24*, [accessed 10 November 2023].

³² Welsh Government (2024), *Written Statement: Commission for Tertiary Education and Research* [January 2024].

HEFCW funds teaching, research and innovation, and capital investment in Welsh HEIs. Research and innovation funding includes recurrent research funding, referred to as QR funding, which is allocated through a formula measuring quality, volume, and sustainability. HEFCW also allocates a separate funding stream to support the training that HEIs provide for postgraduate research, which is not included in their records of QR funding. The REF is used for the quality and volume components of the QR funding formula.³³ Prior to the publication of REF 2021, HEFCW reviewed its research funding formula with the aim of providing a simplified and more transparent allocation method. According to HEFCW, this review resulted in minor alterations to the methodology of the formula, but little change to the key principles.³⁴

HEFCW's funding allocations increased by 15% from 2018-19 up to 2021-22 but remained fixed up to 2023-24. The overall increase over this period is accounted for by the 2021-22 academic year, when a higher-than-anticipated budget enabled an increase of £10.6 million in allocated QR funding.³⁵ Since this increase, the allocation of QR funding has flatlined in Wales.

³³ HEFCW (2023) *HEFCW's research funding method from AY 2022/23*, pp.5-6, [accessed 3 September 2023].

³⁴ HEFCW (2023) *Research Funding method 2022/23*, pp. 2-3, [accessed 3 September 2023].

³⁵ HEFCW (2023) *HEFCW's Funding Allocations for Academic Year 2023/24*, [accessed 3 September 2023].

Changes to recurrent research funding

Recent trends in recurrent research funding

Trends in recurrent research funding allocations have been impacted by the broader UK government agenda to increase public investment in R&D. In 2022, R&D allocations set out by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy included a significant increase in funding for UKRI, raising its budget to £8.9 billion for 2024-2025.³⁶ This 14% increase in UKRI's overall budget translated to a 13% increase in Research England's QR funding for the academic year 2022-23. The devolved governments in the other three administrations of the UK have not made increases at a similar scale to the budgets of their own funding bodies in this time.

Figure 1 below shows that England has seen the highest percentage increase in quality-related recurrent research funding since 2018-19 (+25%), while in Scotland funding has only increased marginally (+2%). Perhaps most striking is the fact that funding in each administration has flatlined over the past year, a period that has seen particularly high levels of inflation. This amounts to a significant reduction in the real terms value of funding. Since we know that the overall public R&D budget has increased over the past year, the implication is that the growth of recurrent research funding might be being restrained by wider financial pressures.

The bodies that administer recurrent research funding each have a different remit and scope as organisations. Table 1 illustrates this well. Recurrent research funding makes up a small proportion of total spend for some, and more for others.

For example, the Department for the Economy Northern Ireland has a remit that goes far beyond the HE sector and fulfils a wide range of functions across the devolved government, including wider economic policy and specific policy areas like energy, tourism and telecoms.³⁷ Therefore, recurrent research funding only makes up between 10-15% of its total spending. However, in the case of Research England, QR delivery is one of its core functions as an organisation, within the wider structure of UKRI, so the percentage of its total budget devoted to QR funding is far higher.

As a result of the policy of the Scottish Government to provide free university tuition to domestic students in Scotland, the Scottish Funding Council also provides significant funding for teaching in Scottish HEIs. Therefore, the percentage of its budget devoted to research funding, including the REG, is relatively low. Although to a lesser extent, HEFCW also provides separate funding for teaching in Welsh HEIs, so it too has a wider remit across the HE landscape compared to Research England.

As a result, it is important to note that these figures are not presented alongside one another to encourage direct comparison, as if these organisations are exact equivalents of one another. Rather, the intention is to use these figures to demonstrate the differences between the roles of these different organisations as well as to track internal changes in funding levels within each organisation over several years. Table 1 also shows how quality-related recurrent research funding has changed in relation to overall budgets since 2018-19 in the different devolved administrations.

³⁶ BEIS (2022) *BEIS research and development (R&D): UK Research and Innovation allocation 2022-2023 to 2024-2025* [accessed 20 March 2024].

³⁷ Department for the Economy, *About the Department for the Economy*, [accessed 26 March 2024].

Figure 1. Percentage change in allocated quality-related recurrent research funding across the four nations, relative to 2018-19.³⁸

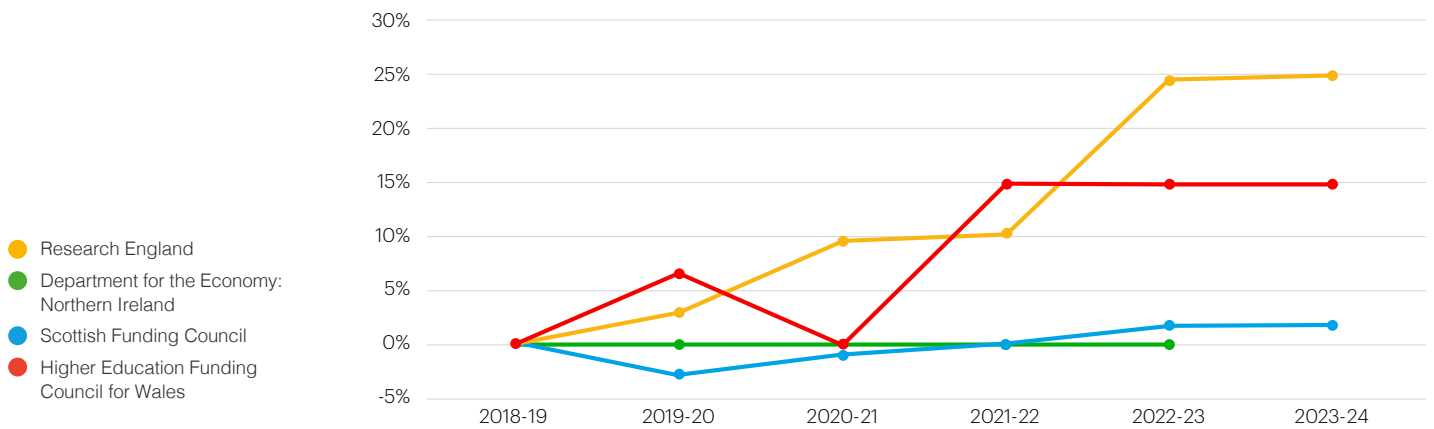


Table 1. Quality-related recurrent research funding as a percentage of total funding body budget across the UK.³⁹

	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
Research England	76%	74%	81%	71%	72%	73%
Dept for the Economy Northern Ireland	10%	10%	15%	15%	N/A	N/A
Scottish Funding Council	22%	22%	22%	21%	21%	21%
Higher Education Funding Council for Wales	51%	42%	41%	40%	38%	38%

Table 1 shows percentages are relatively stable, apart from in Wales, where we see a pattern of decline in the share of total HEFCW funding, which has increased by approximately £80 million since 2018-19, being apportioned to QR. These figures should be read with some caution, as share of overall funding will change based on fluctuations in other funding streams at the organisation (as Figure 1 shows, there has been a net increase of 15% in QR funding in Wales over the past five years). However, it should be noted that in Wales the new CTER will be operational from 2024, with a broader remit spanning across the whole tertiary education landscape, meaning recurrent research funding will inevitably form an even smaller proportion of its overall funding.

Not included in the figures above is the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), a five-year programme running from 2016-2021 that supported research to address challenges faced by developing countries, provided through the UK Government’s Official Development Assistance (ODA).⁴⁰ The four national funding bodies allocated part of the GCRF to HEIs based on research quality, in much the same way as other recurrent research funding. However, due to its distinctive nature, and because it was distributed according to different timelines to other recurrent research funding, the GCRF was usually excluded from calculations of recurrent funding in funding bodies’ annual allocation documents. In this paper, the GCRF has been excluded from calculations of allocated funding as far as is possible according to each nation’s allocation records, to provide consistency, although it is important to acknowledge it as part of the wider recurrent funding landscape.

³⁸ Source: Funding allocations for [Research England](#), [Department for the Economy Northern Ireland](#), [Scottish Funding Council](#), [Higher Education Funding Council for Wales](#) 2018-19 to 2023-24. Data is unavailable for Northern Ireland from 2022-23 onwards for total funding and from 2023-24 for allocated QR funding [accessed 23 May 2024]. Note actual funding may differ from allocated funding in specific circumstances (for example, HEFCW’s actual QR funding in 2020-21 was £4.73m higher than the allocated funding (HEFCW (2022), [HEFCW’s Funding Allocations 2021/22](#) [accessed 10 November 2023]).

³⁹ Source: Overall budget allocations for [Research England](#), [Department for the Economy Northern Ireland](#), [Scottish Funding Council](#), [Higher Education Funding Council for Wales](#) 2018-19 to 2023-24 [accessed 23 May 2024].

⁴⁰ UKRI (2023), [Global Challenges Research Fund](#), [accessed 22 May 2024].

QR funding in England compared to the total UKRI budget

It is also important to consider how recurrent research funding has compared with wider research and innovation funding over recent years. This gives an indication of where the balance of priorities lies in the context of the expansion of public spending on R&D. Due to the complications in aggregating funding for the whole of the UK, QR funding in England has been used as an illustrative example here.

Figure 2 shows how allocated QR funding in England compares to the total UKRI budget. UKRI funds Research England, as well as the UK's seven Research Councils and Innovate UK, the national innovation agency. These bodies are all funded through the UKRI's core research and innovation budget. UKRI's wider, total budget also comprises funding for other initiatives, including Cross-UKRI Strategic Programmes, as well as infrastructure, and Collective Talent Funding, which supports doctoral training.⁴¹ The dotted lines on Figure 2 represent linear trendlines, which demonstrate the gradual net increases in both Research England's QR funding and the total UKRI budget since 2018-19. The relationship between the two is more precisely illustrated by Table 2, which shows Research England's QR funding as a percentage of the total UKRI budget in each year from 2018-19.

One can see that the level of English QR funding relative to the total UKRI budget fluctuates slightly across this period. However, QR funding in England remains between 20% and 25% of the total UKRI budget. It is hard to discern a clear pattern, but the gradual increase in absolute QR spending over the past five years has ensured that the trend over the medium term is not one of relative decline. In other words, looking past some year-on-year fluctuations in the total UKRI budget, QR in England does not appear to be losing out on its share of overall research and innovation funding.

To provide a longer-term perspective, one can consider the level of QR funding in 2011-12 in England in comparison to the total budget of HEFCE. At this time, the equivalent to QR funding in England was allocated by HEFCE, which was replaced by both the Office for Students (OfS) and UKRI in 2018.

In 2011-12, the total budget of HEFCE was £9.2 billion, with £6.2 billion spent on the recurrent grants for teaching and research. This is 67% of HEFCE's total budget spent on recurrent grants, compared to 24% of UKRI's total budget spent on QR funding (research only) in 2023-24. While this suggests that the percentage of total funding taken up by recurrent grants used to be far higher than is currently the case, this is indicative of the broader funding functions undertaken by UKRI compared to HEFCE.⁴²

⁴¹ UKRI (2023), [UKRI's budget allocation explainers](#), [accessed 16 November 2023].

⁴² HEFCE (2010), [Grant announcement for higher education 2011-12](#), [accessed 27 March 2024].

Figure 2. Comparing the total UKRI budget to QR Funding in England.⁴³

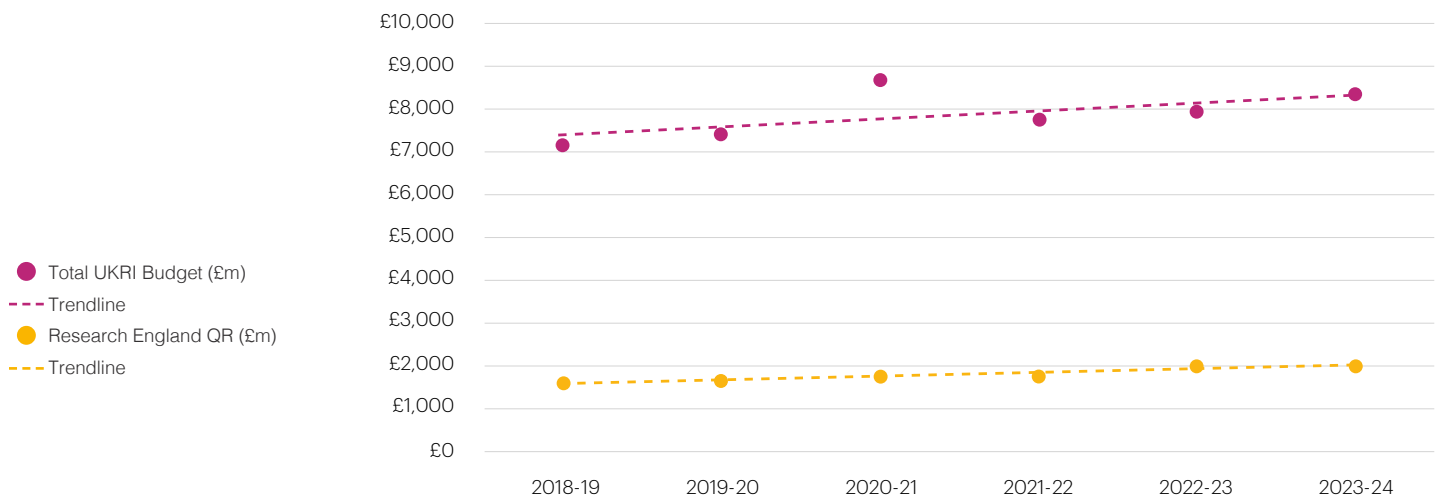


Table 2. English QR funding as a percentage of UKRI's total budget.⁴⁴

	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
English QR funding % of UKRI budget	22%	22%	20%	22%	25%	24%

Summary

This paper has highlighted the vital role recurrent research funding plays in the UK HE sector, including its particular value to the SHAPE disciplines. It is hoped that stakeholders can point to the reasons for the importance of quality-related recurrent research funding that are outlined in this paper to advocate for this type of support remaining a key part of the UK’s overall research funding landscape.

Further, by outlining how recurrent research funding is administered across the four devolved administrations of the UK, the paper seeks to increase understanding of both the similarities and differences in the research funding landscape in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales.

Finally, by situating this type of funding within the wider research and innovation funding landscape, albeit in England only, the paper draws attention to the need to maintain levels of quality-related recurrent research funding relative to any broader increases to R&D budgets.

⁴³ Source: UKRI Budget allocation 2018-19 – 2023-24 & Research England Funding allocations 2018-19 – 2023-24 [accessed 23 May 2024].

⁴⁴ Ibid.