

# UK government proposes scrapping major universities funder

Consultation document may presage shake-up to way that UK science is funded.

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An organization that distributes a large slice of the national science budget to English universities will face the axe, if a UK government proposal gains political support.

In a [consultation document](#), which may presage a wider shake-up to the way in which science is funded in the United Kingdom, the government suggests scrapping the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), which doles out around £1.6 billion (US\$2.4 billion) for research annually to universities.

The proposal, published by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) on 6 November, makes it clear that other organizations would take up HEFCE's responsibilities, although exactly how remains an open question.

Even if the idea does not come to pass, it suggests that the government is not shy of proposing radical changes to the British science-funding landscape.

That is likely to heighten the concerns of UK scientists, who are already braced for a government-wide spending review on 25 November, which may lead to cuts to the science budget. Researchers are also awaiting the results of a separate review into the future of the United Kingdom's seven research councils.



UK researchers fret about downgrading of science minister role

## Two become one?

The UK science budget is distributed in two ways. HEFCE hands out a grant to English universities each year for both research and teaching, allocated on the basis of an audit of university research quality. (Equivalent, smaller bodies hand out the cash in Wales, Northern Ireland, and Scotland). Meanwhile, the research councils invite researchers to compete for grants.

The consultation document emphasizes that scrapping HEFCE would not mean an end to this 'dual-support' system. But it suggests that a single body might in future encompass the functions of both HEFCE and the research councils, with assurances that the two types of funding remain separate.

It is unclear how that would affect the status of the research councils, which are currently independent entities, but might not be if they fell under a new umbrella body. Asked whether such a move might constitute a merger of the research councils, a spokeswoman for BIS told *Nature* that the design of the future research system remains "all up for consultation".



UK releases world's largest university assessment

Moving HEFCE's research functions into the research councils "sounds like a stupid idea", says Kieron Flanagan, a science-policy researcher at the Alliance Manchester Business School. "If you've accepted the principle that we maintain the dual-support system, it doesn't make sense to put both aspects of that in the same hands".

Ultimately, the BIS document says, any decision would be guided by responses to the consultation — which is open for comment until January 2016 — and by the results of the review into the research councils, which is being led by Nobel-prizewinning geneticist Paul Nurse, president of Royal Society in London. Scrapping HEFCE would require the approval of parliament.

## Merging funding agencies

With Nurse's review, and a perceived drive by BIS secretary Sajid Javid [to reduce the number of the department's partner agencies](#), researchers had already been speculating before today's consultation about whether the research councils might be merged.

Flanagan thinks that that would be a mistake. The agencies already share some administrative functions, and any further merging would bring marginal gains but sizeable risks, he says. "I don't think there's any example of a large, successful research system that

has a single science-funding body.”

These are not the only ideas explored in the BIS proposal. Another option is to create a new body to replace the research-related functions of HEFCE (whose teaching-related and regulatory responsibilities would be taken up by a different organization, the Office for Students). Flanagan and others wonder whether BIS might itself hand out research money, although this option is not mentioned in the consultation.

The proposal is clear that scrapping HEFCE would not mean scrapping the United Kingdom’s university research audit, known as the Research Excellence Framework, which every few years grades the quality of research in universities. However, in future the government will look to reduce the [burden of this audit](#), potentially by making greater use of metrics, it says. A future audit might also try to limit costs by discouraging the “industries” that it says some institutions create around the exercise, such as [carrying out multiple mock assessments and bringing in external consultants](#).

More widely, the BIS consultation is designed to refocus the UK university system on teaching. The Office for Students would, for example, take responsibility of a new Teaching Excellence Framework, which will judge a university’s teaching performance against measures such as student satisfaction and graduate job prospects. In future, universities’ ability to increase the tuition fees they charge in line with inflation will be tied to “high-quality teaching”, the document adds.

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