

School of Environment, Education and Development

SEED Policy on Research Groups

August 2016

Background

The University of Manchester has at its core an ambitious goal to become one of *the* leading centres of academic research in the world. This is at the heart of the University's Research Expectations document. These research expectations include raising of research output quality, with all research active staff being expected to produce at least four outputs in a REF period that are of 3* quality, with two aspiring to be 4*, and a doubling of research income. By 2020 research grant capture levels are targeted to be twice that achieved in 2010. These research expectations represent a significant challenge for SEED. Many of our disciplines did extremely well in REF 2014 in terms of output quality. However, for all disciplines there is considerable work remaining on raising the quality, and impact, of our scholarly work in time for REF 2021. Similarly, the grant capture goals require SEED to generate over £9M of research funds per year by 2020. Achieving these output quality and grant funding goals are in our interest; as individual academics, as disciplines and as a School. It will, however, require not just individual but increasingly collective efforts and a clearly set out research strategy at the level of the School, our five disciplines and our UMRI research institutes. A key aspect of this research strategy is the importance of research groups within SEED. The Faculty has set out a guideline document for research groups and research centres. The SEED Policy on Research Groups draws heavily on this.

Why the need for Research Groups?

While much of the excellent research undertaken in SEED is done by individuals, it increasingly involves research collaborations with and amongst colleagues, and at various levels. Such group and team based working practices in research, both within and across disciplines, are of greater relevance today in terms of addressing the core research questions and challenges that we seek to answer, and in response to the growing practice amongst leading research funders for developing and implementing larger grants. Collaborative research endeavour facilitates the development of a critical mass of research activity around pressing questions, helps to generate higher levels of research income and impact and adds value to the intellectual life of SEED and its disciplines. Such groups can enhance the overall research culture and provide venues for mentoring and support to early career researchers and doctoral students as well as established academics. To be effective, however, this requires a framework that better embed research groups within SEED.

There are a number of active and effective research groups already operating within SEED's disciplines. Yet, no clear guidelines exist on their roles, management and governance practices. This document sets out core principles for the aims, organisation and management of research groups (RGs) within SEED. The SEED policy is intended to ensure that RGs are seen as critical entities within the School and its disciplines, provide a solid basis for promoting research culture, are flexibly structured and managed and where necessary resourced. The policy provides guidelines on administrative and structural context. However, it is acknowledged that a flexible approach to the governance practices will be necessary across the disciplines within SEED. There is clearly no 'one size fits all' and practices around RGs in SEED will have to be cognisant of disciplinary norms, challenges and requirements.

1 SEED Research Agenda.

SEED leads on one of the University's five research beacons – with GDI spearheading on 'addressing global inequalities', and has a significant expertise on another beacon – namely Energy. In addition, SEED has identified four core research themes that cover its research ambitions across its constituent disciplines:

- Governance, Policy and Practice
- Urbanism
- Poverty and Social Justice
- Environmental Change

Given this agenda, SEED already has two recognised University of Manchester Research Institutes (UMRI). GDI was formally launched in February 2016, and the Manchester Urban Institute (MUI) which will be launched in 2016-17. Together these institutes represent key aspects of SEED's research strategy and ambitions. In addition, each of SEED's disciplines and UMRI institutes have clearly outlined research themes that define their core research focus. These are:

- Global Development Institute (GDI)
 - Prosperity, Inequality and Poverty
 - Political Economy of Globalisation
 - Politics, Governance and Management
 - Environmental, Urban and Agrarian Change
- Manchester Institute of Education (MIE)
 - Educational Policy and Leadership,
 - Critical Pedagogies and Maths Education,
 - Special Educational and Additional Needs,
 - Equity, Disadvantage and Poverty.
- Geography
 - Cities, Politics and Economies
 - Social and Cultural Geography
 - Society and Environment
 - Environmental Processes
 - Quaternary Environments and Geo-archaeology
- Architecture

- Urban Design;
- Urban Development;
- Ecological and Landscape Design;
- Conservation and Management of Historic Environments.
- Planning and Environmental Management (PEM)
 - International Planning
 - Spatial Analysis
 - Sustainable Urbanism
 - Territorial Governance
- Manchester Urban Institute (MUI) as a multi-disciplinary entity (with SEED colleagues from Geography, Architecture, Planning and Environmental Management, and GDI actively involved) addresses four signature programmes:
 - Informalities and Vulnerabilities
 - Smart Cities and Transition
 - Spatial Inequalities and Poverty
 - Urban Governance and Politics

In order to address these research ambitions, each discipline and institute would be expected to have a number of research groups constituted, ideally around the themes set out for each discipline. **[A final list of current Research Groups and their members will be appended to this policy.]** The expected norm in SEED would be that every member of the research and teaching career-track academic staff and every PGR research student are (and will be) encouraged to be affiliated to at least one research group. Some colleagues may prefer to work as individual researchers and choose not to join a research group. This is fine, but the norm will increasingly be one where most colleagues, and research students, will be active members of discipline, and/or cross-disciplines, based research groups.

The SEED research group policy proposes a close link between discipline and institute specific themes and existing and future research groups. In some disciplines (such as Geography and MIE) research themes parallel existing research groups. In GDI, however, there are currently 11 research groups that need to be more closely aligned to GDI's four core research themes. Finally staff numbers in Architecture and in PEM are such that it makes little sense to set up multiple research groups. Instead, these disciplines could each constitute a singular research group, or consider forming cross disciplinary groups. There will be flexibility to allow new research groups to emerge where critical new research agendas are identified, to close down RGs that are no longer active, and promote cross-disciplinary research groups within SEED that strengthen our ability to address key emergent research challenges.

The primary objectives of each research group will be to promote the research culture, organise regular workshops and research seminars, engage with leading external academics, provide peer support, including reviewing and mentoring on research especially for early career researchers (ECRs), embed PGRs into an active research community, and encourage the development of individual and collective research funding initiatives. While there may be variations within SEED, research active staff and PGRs will have at least one research group that constitutes their research 'home', providing a venue for them to receive research peer support and through which their research activities would, in effect, be facilitated.

2 Research Groups (RGs)

2.1 Purpose and characteristics

- 2.1.1 Typically, RGs will be mid-sized, fairly informal, entities that fall between the existing categories of Research Centres and individual researcher. RGs add value to the intellectual work of colleagues and the intellectual life of the discipline/School more broadly. Research groups will be loosely managed, with a named convenor, and will organise their activities in a flexible fashion in ways that seek to promote the overall research culture.
- 2.1.2 RGs are inclusive in nature and involve PGRs, research staff and post-doctoral researchers as well as tenured staff, within a single disciplinary area, or spread across several areas. Although size alone will not be a defining factor, RGs should define for themselves their programme(s) of research – this has to be more than a project (or a series of a projects) undertaken by a sole researcher. Whilst there is no prescribed timescale for the duration of such research programme(s) within a RG, it would be expected that a programme(s) has duration of at least three years.
- 2.1.3 There is no expectation for systematic achievements in terms of raising income for research activities or achieving policy impacts, although there is the expectation that these activities should be nurtured and encouraged.
- 2.1.4 Each research group would be named on the SEED and discipline websites and be required to maintain and update their webpages, highlighting their research related activities, outputs and events. This will attract interest from the outside world, including academic visitors and/or prospective students/PGRs. This will be even more relevant where the RG has significant funded projects where external project links require recognition and visibility.
- 2.1.5 The primary objective of research groups is to promote the research culture within and across disciplines. This will ordinarily be done through regular group meetings (including through reading groups, seminars and workshops) to exchange ideas relating to a shared intellectual agenda, or to plan grant applications, conference activities, or other initiatives. Research groups will also provide a venue for providing peer reviewing and research mentoring as well as supporting ECRs and PGRs. An active research group will thus have a clear and direct link to enhancing research productivity.
- 2.1.6 It is understood that research groups may alter their focus over time and may wind-down as conditions change, just as others may serve as incubators for more formally constituted centres.
- 2.1.7 RGs will largely operate with autonomy from School structures but will be expected to report to, and account for their activities at discipline level.

2.2 Support mechanisms for RGs

- 2.2.1 RGs can request financial resources and support from the University, Faculty, School's (and where relevant discipline-level) research support funds.
- 2.2.2 SEED strategic funding resources will give priority to funding requests from RGs, especially where such requests are geared to help raise external funding grants.
- 2.2.3 RGs and their members will be expected to actively participate in school and faculty funding initiatives such as HSIF and UMRI, thus promoting tacit and explicit knowledge with regards to grant capture and building capacity.

2.3 Establishment of a RG

- 2.3.1 The establishment of RGs will be flexibly managed and done at the discipline level or Institute levels. The School is also keen to encourage the formation of, where feasible, multi-discipline research groups. Proposals for research groups will be developed at the disciplines and cross-discipline level with formal approval provided by the School Research Committee. A short proposal (2- 4 pages) would be required, setting out the rationale for the research group, the aims and agenda of the RG, its proposed activities, its membership (including ECRs and PGRs) and its identified convenor. Identifying research activities that have already been taking place by RG members, and the ways in which the RG would attract academic involvement from across the School as well as other forms of external interest and possible collaboration would also be important. Any supplementary information or evidence of support from across the School would be welcomed. The Research Director and SEED Research Committee will approve RG applications put forward by Discipline Research Directors and notify the Head of School (HOS) and relevant Heads of Disciplines (HODs).
- 2.3.2 The organisation, management and planned activities of each RG will be left to the RG members to determine. Each RG will identify a name RG Convenor who will serve to liaise between the RG and the Discipline Research Director. It will be left to disciplines to determine the level of workpoints to be awarded to RG convenors as part of the Discipline's WAM model.

2.4 Review of research groups

- 2.4.1 RGs are not subject to a formal and regular process of scrutiny. However, if the vibrancy and performance of a research group is in question, for example demonstrated by a lack of substantive research activity, the Director of Research of the School and/or the Discipline Research Director may request the production of an annual report which will then be subjected to review.
- 2.4.2 The key criteria for consideration in such reviews will be: Does the RG have a clear research agenda, such that it warrants being a named entity? Does the RG have a critical mass of members to make it intellectually viable? Does the RG have a regular programme of activities? Is the RG promoting its work both within and without the school/the faculty and the wider university? Is the RG attracting high quality and

consistently productive staff to its activities? Although grant capture is not a primary objective of RGs, it will be important to consider if RG members are active in bidding for external grants?

2.5 Management of research groups

2.5.1 The management of RGs is deliberately devolved to the group and without much interference from formal structures in the school. In line with the purpose of RGs to nourish and develop academic agendas and support scholarly activities, the structures should be lean and without much bureaucracy. The emphasis is on flexibility and informality through management with a 'light touch'.

- However, under certain circumstances and depending on the local context, it may be appropriate to set up more formal structures within RGs. This is at the discretion of the School's Research Committee and will be based on the size/intellectual agenda/funding/complexity of the entity.
- Where a RG management committee is formed, there will be consultation with the Discipline Research Director and the SEED Research Committee regarding membership, structure and organisation of the management committee. Whilst not prescriptive, the terms of reference for such a Management Committee might be as follows:
 - a) to establish and provide advice on the overall strategic direction for the RG and its activities, in accordance with its objectives.
 - b) to set and, as necessary, amend the RG's objectives.
 - c) to agree an annual work-plan and annual budget for the RG's activities (ensuring that the RG continues to meet appropriate scholarly outputs and an agreed financial threshold).
 - d) to review overall management and delivery of the RGs activities against annual plans and budgets.
 - e) Norms will have to be set out in the ToR regarding the frequency of meetings of the Management Committee, the level of quorum, and the notification of meetings.