

## **School of Environment, Education and Development**

### **SEED Policy on Research Centres**

August 2016

One of the core objectives of the University of Manchester is to be placed amongst the leading centres of academic research in the world. The University has already made significant strides in this direction, but more remains to be done on this, especially in meeting many of the grand research challenges. This applies especially to the highly research active, and successful, School of Environment, Education and Development (SEED). A key plank of SEED's future research strategy will be to strengthen the role and ambitions of research centres (RC) within the School. 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. Consequently, in line with the recent Faculty of Humanities guidelines on research groups and centres, on which this note draws heavily, we need to strengthen the position of research centres within SEED, while also raising the bar with regards to research quality, research grant capture, and overall governance of research centres located in the School. The SEED Research Centre policy details the objectives and aims of research centres (RCs) within SEED. It sets out core principles driving the organisation and management of SEED research centres and it outlines the criteria for regular reviews of SEED RCs.

#### **1 Objectives and Aims of Research Centres in SEED**

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Research Centres are of a 'higher' order than Research Groups. They may be disciplinary, cross-disciplinary or even cross School based. They serve to underline the presence of a critical mass of research colleagues and research activity within their given areas of focus. This serves to enhance the effectiveness and impact of the research endeavour of the RC both internally, within the University of Manchester, and most importantly externally. The presence of a RC may highlight areas of critical and strategic research focus that seeks to enhance the discipline, School and/or Faculty's/University's overall research strategy.

Consequently, RCs in SEED have to be cognizant of, and at some level seek to respond to, the key research themes that are central to the University, Faculty, SEED and to individual disciplines. The University identifies 5 core ‘research beacons’ as part of its overall research endeavours. One of these five, ‘addressing global inequalities’, is spear-headed by the Global Development Institute (GDI) within SEED. GDI is already ranked as amongst the top three globally in international development studies. In addition, there is a further research beacon, on ‘energy’, on which colleagues within SEED have significant expertise. Further to this, SEED has identified four core research themes that drive its overall research strategy. These include: poverty and social justice; environment; urbanism; and governance, policy and practice. On the urbanism theme the School has built significant expertise bringing together a range of colleagues from across disciplines within and outside of SEED under the umbrella of the newly formed Manchester Urban Institute (MUI). GDI and MUI, as recognised University of Manchester Research Institutes, are, and will be, at the forefront of the SEED research agenda, strategy and ambitions over the coming decade. At the same time, there are a number of other critical research themes at the discipline level, and at time cutting across disciplines, where SEED has critical mass and significant expertise.

The aim of a RC in SEED is to provide a formal structure through which to address one of the critical areas of global challenge, and that responds to the strategic research goals identified at the University, Faculty, School, and Discipline levels. A clear expectation in SEED is that RCs would systematically generate research income over time. There is a further expectation that there is a clear strategy in place for achieving impact. RCs in SEED would be relatively formally structured and managed. They would also be periodically reviewed by the School and the Faculty on their performance. The criteria for such reviews would be determined at the School level and through the School Research Committee (SRC) and the School Policy and Resources Committee (SPRC) and in keeping with overall Faculty guidelines. Core to the review process would be evidencing high quality research output and significant external grant capture.

## **2 Purpose and characteristics of SEED research centres**

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2.1.1 A research centre has a formal status within the School and will be required to account for its activities to the School Research Committee and to the Faculty. It will play an important role in implementing and communicating key aspects of the School’s research strategy. It will serve several of the following purposes:

- a) To be a vehicle for promoting and branding research and knowledge exchange to staff and to the outside world.
- b) To facilitate formulation and implementation of particular areas of School research strategy.
- c) To provide a structure to secure external funding in a specific area of research.
- d) To facilitate cross-discipline, cross-School and potentially cross-Faculty work on a shared challenge or problem.
- e) To provide a critical mass of cognate researchers.
- f) To provide a supportive environment for research staff and potentially also PGR students.

- 2.1.2 Research Centres will normally be located within the School. Where there is a complementarity between research areas that exist in different schools, a RC may be set up across SEED and other schools. In such circumstances, the governance, management and review will have the full involvement of SEED and other schools that constitute the Centre. However, the Centre will, for governance purposes, be 'housed' in the host school of the Centre Director.

## **2.2 Establishment of Research Centres**

- 2.2.1 The School's Research Committee is responsible for initial assessment of proposals to establish new Research Centres, where applicable in accordance with the UoM procedures for approving major academic initiatives. The Committee will assess both the intellectual and financial viability of new proposals. It will seek to ensure the production of high quality, disciplinary and scalable inter- disciplinary research that has a clear public engagement and impact agenda. The School (via the Research Committee) will look for the following minimal attributes:

- a. A critical mass of staff with a track record of collaboration around a set of cognate research interests (normally this would be between 5 and 15 people)
- b. A well-focused but sufficiently broad intellectual agenda
- c. The capacity to make a major contribution to implementing one or more aspects of, or highlighted themes within, the School research strategy
- d. A history of research activities which are clearly associated with the group and which go beyond that of organising regular seminar and lecture series and/or disseminating news and information (this may include, but is not restricted to, multiple successful grant applications; a closely linked postgraduate programme; the hosting of a series of visiting professors and/or postdoctoral fellows; a range of prominent research impact and knowledge transfer initiatives)
- e. A clearly distinctive profile vis-à-vis other existing centres in the School and beyond.

- 2.2.2 A proposal for a Research Centre should normally carry the support of at least two heads of disciplines/ centre directors/ research group convenors and confirm there is broad school and discipline level support. In addition, the proposer(s) should demonstrate that they have consulted other research centres that may have a material interest in the proposal.

- 2.2.3 The proposal should set out:

- Proposed full name of the centre
- The Centre's mission and a description of the Centre's (research) objectives and work programme, through which this will be achieved. There should be details of measureable outputs that are expected to be delivered and against which the effectiveness of the centre will be assessed.
- The Centre's intellectual history and evidence of a shared identity: whether the proposal represents a formalization of a loose structure or a new departure for

- the School; the track record the School has within the broad research area and how the centre aims to become an internationally recognised leader in the field.
- The wider research environment: whether comparable centres exist elsewhere and more generally a picture of related research in the UK and globally. Furthermore, details of relationships with other research groupings or activities within and outside the university.
- The potential contribution the School: in the context of the wider research environment, what "added value" the Centre will bring to the research community at the School and externally; the contribution the Centre will make to future Research Excellence Framework (REF) exercises

#### 2.2.4 In addition, the proposal should establish:

- Management and governance arrangements.
- A financial plan, including plans related to external funding.
- Who will direct the Centre and her/his qualifications for the role?
- An impact strategy: details of the key audiences for this work and the pathways to impact that will be pursued. This will also include a communications plan that sets out details on the Centre's proposed website and associated social media as well as other aspects of its communications strategy.
- A strategy for the development of capacity (including for ECRs) in relation to publishing high quality outputs and generating external grant income.
- A strategy for the integration of the doctoral community (PGRs) within the discipline, School, and where relevant across Schools, levels.
- Where relevant, a business engagement strategy that outlines how the RC would engage with external partners, including on areas of knowledge co-production and partnership as well as on grant capture.

#### 2.2.5 Research Committee will evaluate the application against the following criteria:

- Size: does it involve a critical mass of researchers? Are the likely income flows commensurate with research centre status and will they help the schools to achieve its targets in this regard?
- Scope: is the intellectual focus and scope commensurate with research centre status (e.g. as opposed to research project or group status)?
- Intellectual contribution: will the proposed research centre showcase school research in key thematic areas that is at least internationally-recognised, and ideally with the potential to become world-leading?
- Strategic contribution: the value of the research programme to the School and the wider scholarly community;
- Governance: what are the implications for the overall portfolio of research centres within the school and the faculty of humanities in terms of achieving coherence and synergies?
- Track record: does the centre seek to capitalise on an established history of high-quality and productive collaborative work?
- Financial sustainability and targets for external research grant capture.
- Communications strategy

- Business engagement strategy

## **2.3 Governance of Research Centres in SEED**

- 2.3.1 All Research Centres in SEED will be governed by the School Research Committee (SRC). The SRC will be ultimately responsible to ensure that RC is achieving its objectives, both in terms of high quality scholarly output as well as research income generation, and is being properly managed and run. This will be done through annual performance reviews of RCs conducted by the SRC in conjunction with the Faculty.
- 2.3.2 Each RC will be expected to have a named Centre Director who will provide intellectual leadership to the RC and be responsible for its overall management.
- 2.3.3 Each RC will have a Management Committee to assist the Centre Director. The management committee will be informally constituted and will include leading members of the RC academic team and, where relevant, external partners. The SRC may decide to appoint a nominee to the Management Committee of a RC. The Management Committee would be expected to meet at least every two months.
- 2.3.4 Depending on their size, RCs in SEED may be required to appoint an Advisory Board that has a majority of members from outside the Centre. The Advisory Board may be useful to provide the Centre Director and members of the Management Committee with an external perspective. The Advisory Board will normally be chaired by a member external to the School and will, where possible, also include external members selected for their ability to provide the benefit of their expertise as commissioners or users of research, as policy experts and policy partners, as members of the business community, and/or as fundraisers. The Centre Director and other key members of the Management Committee will be invited to attend the Advisory Board. The Advisory Board will be expected to meet at least once a year. Membership terms are five years, renewable.
- 2.3.5 The specific terms of reference of an Advisory Board will be set by the RC but require approval of the School Research Committee. These would normally include:
1. to advise on the general strategy for the Research Centre in order to achieve its objectives.
  2. to advise on actions to be taken to advance specific agendas of the Research Centre, including (i) communication plans, especially engagement with and dissemination to potential users of the research, and the impact of research; (ii) areas where the project team identifies a lack of appropriate progress or anticipates future difficulties in the Centre's achievement of its objectives.
  3. to advise on issues referred to the Board by the management committee. These may include: proposed modifications to the Research Centre's budget; (ii) specific communication and dissemination activities.
  4. to comment on the draft Annual Report.

## **2.4 Management of research centres**

- 2.4.1 Each Centre should normally have a single Director although joint directorship may be useful depending on circumstances. The role of the Director is to provide academic and intellectual leadership and to be responsible for the effective management of the Centre. The Director is responsible for reporting on the research funds held within the Centre as a whole. A Centre may institutionalise a budget committee or sub-group, formed by members of the centre. Individual grant-holders are responsible for the conduct of funded research projects and programmes.
- 2.4.2 The Management Committee will be chaired by the Director of the Research Centre and will comprise academic and research staff attached to the Centre and, where relevant, the Centre Manager. The Head of the School or School Research Director to which the Centre is affiliated will be member of the Committee ex-officio, and will be entitled to send a representative to attend meetings of the Committee. Representatives of other interested subject units can be encouraged to attend. External members of the Centre are restricted to academic staff collaborating on the Centre's research projects or programmes, and may attend meetings at the invitation of the Director of the Centre. External representation from funding bodies is prohibited in the management committee to safeguard - and to be seen to safeguard - the independence of the Centre's research programmes. However, external representation from funders, research users and other external non-academic bodies is welcomed on the Advisory Board.
- 2.4.3 The Management Committee is advisory to the Director of the Research Centre and to other members of the Committee in the discharge of their executive powers and responsibilities. The Management Committee is responsible for setting academic priorities and organizing research programmes; for examining the budget; for overseeing human resource matters; for receiving the Director's reports; for advising the Research Committee on the succession of the Director of the Centre; and for reporting to both the Advisory Board and the School's Research Committee.

## **2.5 Template terms of reference for the Management Committee**

- 2.5.1 The standard terms of reference, which may be varied by approval of the Research Committee, are:
1. to establish and provide advice on the overall strategic direction for the Centre and its activities, in accordance with its objectives.
  2. to set and, as necessary, amend the Centre's objectives.
  3. to agree an annual research plan and annual budget for the Centre's activities.
  4. to review overall management and delivery of the Centre's activities against annual plans and budgets.
  5. to oversee the Centre's compliance with local (University, Faculty, School) procedures and policies.
- 2.5.2 The Management Committee is required to meet in plenary at least once every two months. There is no quorum. Notification of the dates of the next meetings must be

provided at the preceding meeting. Notification of the agenda for each meeting should normally be provided a week in advance of the meeting and *must* be provided at least two working days in advance.

## **2.6 Review of Research Centres**

2.6.1 There is a clear expectation that the performance of RCs is periodically reviewed. The School's Research Committee (sometimes with input from the Faculty level) is responsible for undertaking formal reviews (internal / external) of all Research Centres. There will be two levels of reviews:

2.6.1.1 First, an annual performance review undertaken by the SRC where RCs will be expected to report on their research activities, research outputs and success in obtaining internal and external grants. Reviews should provide an assessment of whether the Centre's plans are on track and highlight any issues which need to be addressed.

2.6.1.2 Second, more extensive performance reviews of a RC will be conducted every three years to determine whether a RC should be allowed to continue operating as a Research Centre. This will also involve inputs from the Faculty. The 3 year performance review would focus on the Centre's success in enriching the research culture, in producing high quality research outputs, and in raising significant levels of external grant capture. Specific research income targets will be set for each RC at its inception. While targets may vary, any RC within SEED that fails to raise at least £250K of externally funded research grants over a 3 year period is unlikely to be renewed.

2.6.2 The Research Centre's annual and 3 year review reports should provide an assessment of:

- the Centre's current and future intellectual agendas and plans
- the Centre's past performance and contribution to the School community and beyond. This will include evidence:
  - on the Centre's research activities over the year/ 3 years of review
  - of high quality scholarly research output
  - of the impact of research linked to the Centre
  - external research grant capture
  - of capacity building, mentoring and early career support activities undertaken
  - of PGR support and integration into the Centre's activities
- the Centre's current and future financial position

2.6.3 The School and Faculty RC Review Committee will reach its decision on the basis of an evaluation of:

- the Centre's publication record and other academic achievements, and specifically its contributions to REF submissions. This will include areas such as: high quality publications; generation of external research funding; contributions to impact and engagement; development of the wider school research community, including

doctoral programmes and ECRs; contribution to discipline specific activities including leadership roles.

- achievements and progress made against the objectives outlined when the Centre was established
- approval of objectives for the forthcoming three-year period, and beyond if appropriate, including but not limited to research projects, publications, events and visitors
- evidence of the financial sustainability of the Centre
- whether the academic achievements of the unit – including broad public engagement - depend on the existence of a Centre (as opposed to a Departmental home)

2.6.4 The School and Faculty RC Review Committee will decide on this basis whether:

- to approve the continuation of the Centre for a determined period (normally three years);
- to approve the continuation of the Centre for a determined period (normally three years) subject to any specified conditions;
- to recommend that where an RC has failed to meet its core objectives (especially in terms of outputs and grant capture) it is given a period of one year to show a significant improvement in performance, failing which it would be closed down.
- to recommend to the School and the Faculty the discontinuation of the Centre and an exit plan.