

How long will it be until RCUK issues a call for proposals on the London riots?

by Blog Admin

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*There is much debate on how the government will pick up the pieces after the recent rioting and looting in London and other cities. But what do recent events mean for the direction of academic research? **Phil Ward**, Research Funding Manager at the University of Kent, considers how Research Councils have historically focused on contemporary social challenges, and invites you to comment on the possible 'unshackling' of academics from political research.*



As someone who has spent a good deal of time on the funding block, I have always been impressed at how the Research Councils are able to jump on political bandwagons. Of course, they wouldn't see it as such. They would see it as providing research that will answer societies concerns.

After 9/11 and 7/7, it was all about answering the threat from terrorism, particularly Islamic terrorism. Around the same time as Kyoto, it was all about 'Living with Environmental Change'. In the most recent Delivery Plans, all the talk was informed by the 2008 economic crisis, of 'enabl[ing] the development of robust government and private sector strategies to ensure sustainable growth' ([ESRC Delivery Plan 2011-15](#)).

Sometimes they take this too far, and the AHRC has [had its fingers burnt](#) by appearing to not only jump on the 'Big Society' bandwagon, but sit beside the driver and do his bidding.

So, following the recent looting and rioting, how long will it be before a call for proposals is issued around gangs, riots and criminality? My guess is six months to a year, perhaps earlier, and perhaps shoehorned into the ESRC's '[Influencing Behaviour](#)' or '[Vibrant and Fair Society](#)' strands.

However, there is a warning to be heeded about the dangers inherent in adjusting your research funding policy in light of current affairs. Remember all the funding that went on terrorism in the mid-noughties? Has it had any real effect? Are we any closer to understanding or preventing terrorism or acts of carnage? Or has the world yawned and moved on, naturally, to other issues? The events in Norway show that individuals or groups can still kill indiscriminately, and that 'Global Uncertainties' are no nearer resolution.

Whilst I accept the rationale behind the Research Councils' wish to meet contemporary challenges, and of the push to integrate university research with the wider society through the impact agenda, perhaps the time has come to recognise that following the curve of current events is somewhat fruitless. Should the Research Councils now unshackle academics so that they can pursue whatever research is good rather than whatever research is political? I welcome your comments below.

This blog post was originally published on the [Research Fundamentals blog](#).

For more debate on the London riots head to the [LSE Politics and Policy Blog](#).

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