

BIS report on UK Research Councils: Drop in income sees fewer researchers supported but more knowledge created.

blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2014/03/17/bis-report-research-councils-tinkler/

3/17/2014

Jane Tinkler breaks down the key findings from the UK government's Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) report on the impact of research council funding over the last year. With income cuts playing a significant role, the number of principal investigators and research fellowships with research council funding have both gone down. Interestingly, output productivity of funded researchers has actually increased in this time, with a massive 16 per cent increase in the number of refereed publications since 2008/09.

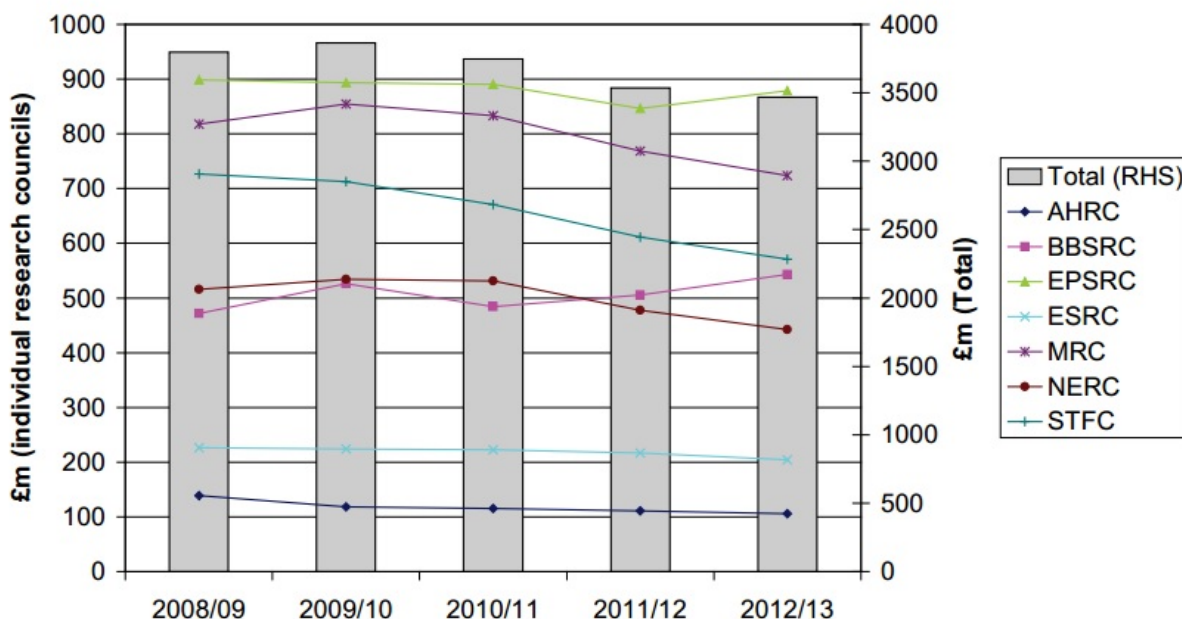


Last week saw the publication of a BIS report on the impact of the UK's research councils: [Research Council Impact Reports 2013: Trends in inputs, outputs and outcomes](#). There is obviously a bit of glee here that research councils themselves should have to provide evidence of their own impact when they demand so many statements on, or pathways to, impact from all who apply for funding. Sadly the report makes clear that it covers performance metrics of the research councils "rather than the wider economic and social impacts of past investments in research". Evidencing wider economic and social impacts is too hard perhaps? Instead the report states that wider impact can be seen in the "wealth of case studies" highlighted in impact reports from each of the individual research councils (also published yesterday).

Income has gone down

Total income for the seven research councils (RCs) has gone down by about 10 per cent since 2009/10 to £3.47 billion. This loss hasn't quite been shared equally; both the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council and the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council have seen their income rise during this period.

Figure 1: Real Income by Research Council



The number of researchers supported by RCs has also decreased

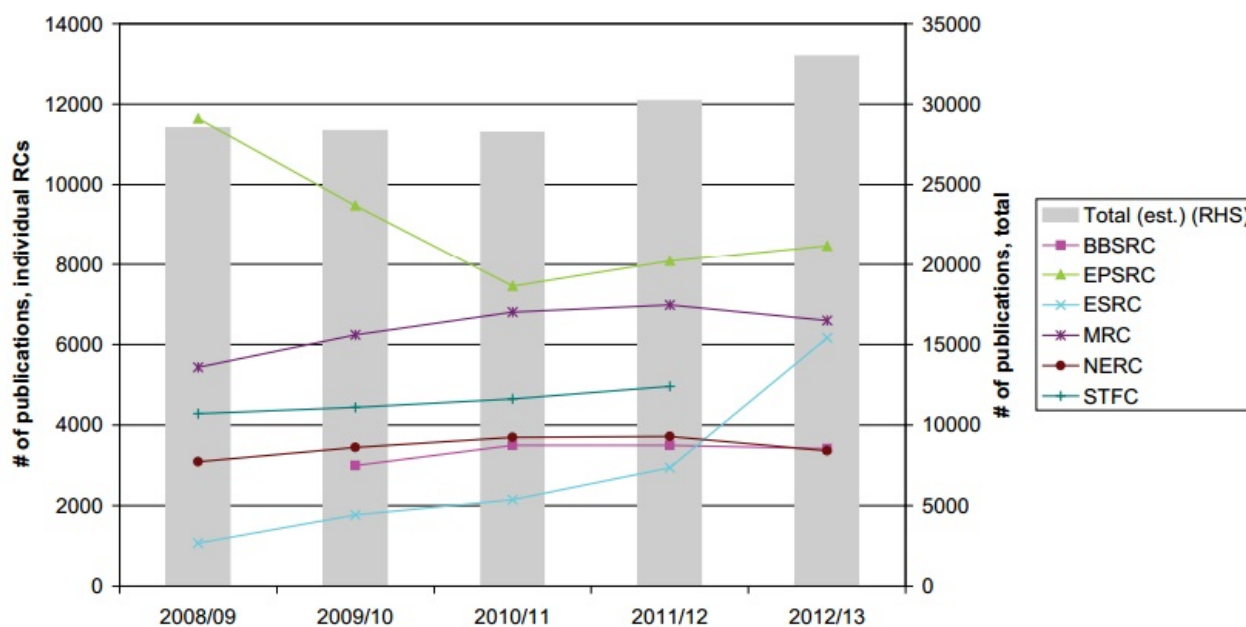
It looks as though the number of researchers that are being supported by the RCs has also gone down. Principal investigator numbers dropped from just over 8,500 in 2009/10 to just under 7,900 in 2012/13. The number of Research Fellowships awarded fell by 18 per cent. But the numbers for the Arts and Humanities Research Council in particular almost halved over the last year from 160 in 2011/12 and 90 in 2012/13. And finally, the number of students being supported to start their PhDs also fell by about 20 per cent to 4,500 across all the research councils in 2012/13. (The report makes clear that EPSRC figures makes up about half of this drop.)

So in general it seems RCs are supporting fewer individual researchers. But the report argues that this may also be a result of RCs changing some policies, for example by encouraging 'critical mass' applications that group a greater number of researchers under one PI reducing that count but actually supporting more researchers. There is a similar justification for the drop in PhD starters with, the report claims, "increased concentration of funding (post-graduate support) among the best and brightest" through initiatives like the BBSRC's Centres for Doctoral Training.

But RC supported academics are doing more

The report then turns to look at outputs and one key metric is the number of refereed articles produced by academics supported by RCs. There has been a 16 per cent increase in the number of these publications since 2008/09, the estimated number now up to around 33,000.

Figure 8: Number of refereed publications by Research Council and in total

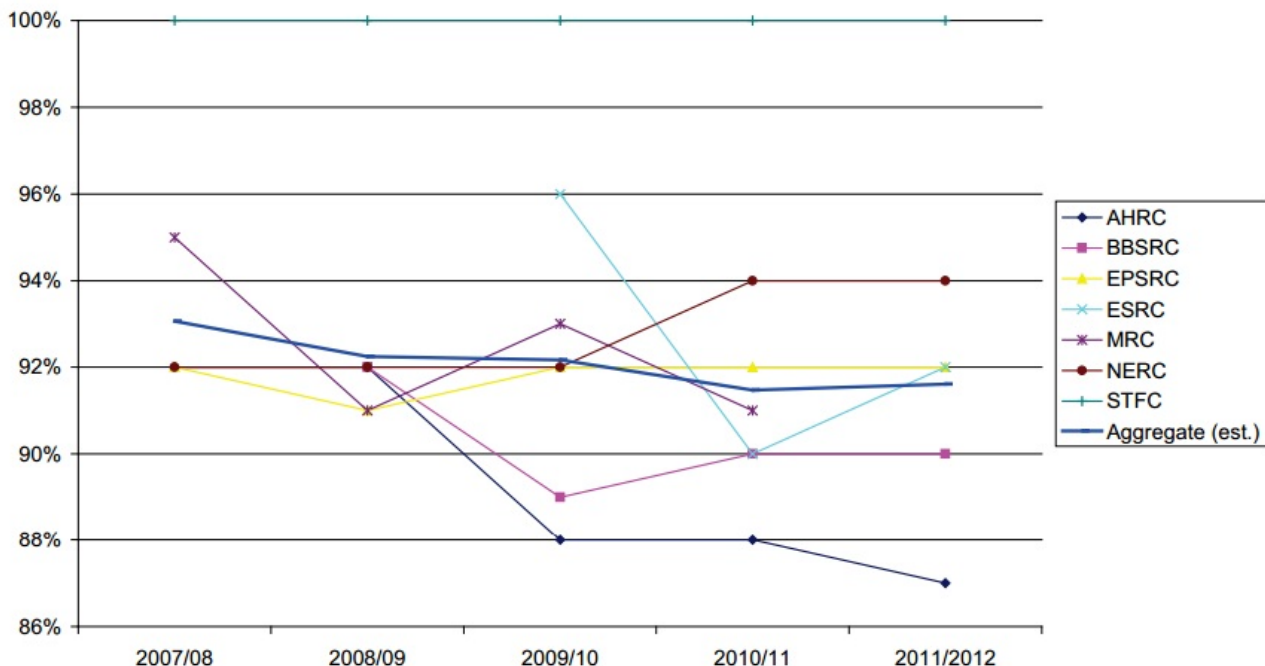


The biggest rise of any individual RC comes from ESRC, a nearly 50 per cent increase from almost 3,000 in 2011/12 to just under 6,200 in 2012/3. (The report offers a change in data collection methods by the ESRC as a reason for this sharp growth but this is not mentioned in the ESRC's own impact report.) It could of course be that all social scientists are writing more, or writing fewer books and concentrating on articles. Or this could be the REF effect of all academics trying to publish four outputs by the end of 2013 in order to be REF-able. However, as the report says, quantity is not a measure of quality.

Fluctuations in employment prospects for recent PhDs

The second metric concerns the human capital of PhD graduates leaving universities and entering professions within higher education and beyond. Figure 11 of the report looks at the PhDs who are not unemployed 6 months after completing their studies (as taken from the annual Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education survey). (Side note: isn't it odd phrasing to show this as those "not unemployed"?)

Figure 11: % of PhDs who are not unemployed 6 months after completing



The figure does show there has been a small decrease in the number of PhDers who are employed six months out of the end of their studies. The report assumes this is due to the changing economic conditions. But there are some fluctuations across the RCs with AHRC and ESRC funded PhDs faring worst.

So overall, despite a drop in income there appears to be signs of optimism from the income being allocated to RCs. Perhaps we are becoming more productive, there are fewer of us but we are producing more outputs. And the value of having a PhD, in terms of how employable it makes you, has only dropped slightly in very difficult conditions. It is obviously difficult to look at impact more widely across all seven councils, when they cover such disparate areas of research. But it still feels that relying on individual case studies of particular projects or academics in impact reports from individual RCs misses an opportunity to look at broad-front joined-up impact from the RCs more generally.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

About the Author

Jane Tinkler has been PPG Manager since September 2005. She is also actively involved in research projects undertaken by PPG. Previous to this, she was Managing Editor of the journals, Political Studies and Political Studies Review for six years. She also was a Research Fellow in the School of Public Policy, University College London. Her first degree was in psychology and business at Leeds University and she later took an MSc at Birkbeck College, University of London.

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