Consultation on the next phase of Sêr Cymru funding

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Our mission is to support a university education system which transforms lives through the work Welsh universities do with the people and places of Wales and the wider world.

Universities Wales welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Welsh Government's draft innovation strategy. Some questions have been grouped for responses.

Universities Wales welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Welsh Government's proposals for the next phase of Sêr Cymru funding.

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Consultation questions

Question 1: Please answer the following questions for each of the 8 proposed components of the next phase of Sêr Cymru detailed above.

Question 1a: Would you support inclusion of 'Capacity Building Awards' in the next phase of the Sêr Cymru programme?

- Yes

Continuing to build upon capacity created by previous rounds of Sêr Cymru funding would be welcome to enable the retention of talent and allow progression. The focus should be within specific areas of Welsh research and innovation to make the most of a limited pool of funding in a strategic manner. (See response to question 7 regarding themes).

Given the challenge of talent retention caused by the loss of European Structural and Investment Funds, there could be a case for focusing Sêr Cymru funding on mid-career and senior researchers rather than on early-career researchers for this phase to prevent loss of talent where possible. Sêr Cymru funding will not plug *all* of the gaps left by the loss of European funding by any means, but if used strategically could mitigate against *some* of the damage.

Question 1b: Would you support inclusion of 'Incoming International Fellowships' in the next phase of the Sêr Cymru programme?

- No

International fellowships could be a helpful mechanism for maintaining or developing international links in particular research areas. However, we would recommend that in identifying the balance of support across these areas it would be helpful to consider what support is available elsewhere such as through the Taith programme.

Question 1c: Would you support inclusion of 'Outgoing International Fellowships' in the next phase of the Sêr Cymru programme?

- No

For the same reasons given above in response to Question 1b, we would recommend that in identifying the balance of support across these areas it would be helpful to consider what support is available elsewhere such as through the Taith programme and Turing scheme.

Question 1d: Would you support inclusion of 'Industry Academia Fellowships' in the next phase of the Sêr Cymru programme?

- No

Although we recognise the benefit of knowledge exchange through engagement of industry with academia, on balance the level of funding support allocated here should take consideration of wider existing support for this type of activity such as through institutional RWIF strategies.

Question 1e: Would you support inclusion of 'PhD Studentships' in the next phase of the Sêr Cymru programme?

- Yes

We support the inclusion of PhD studentships in the next phase of the Sêr Cymru programme, contributing to or match-funding with UKRI CDTs/DTPs or other funders.

Projects such as Knowledge Economy Skills Scholarships (led by Bangor University in partnership with all universities in Wales) has enabled PhD and Master's level students to partner with Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises across Wales boosting their research capacity and encouraging industry-academic partnership. KESS was funded by ERDF and so any funding directed towards similar activity could mitigate the loss these opportunities.

Question 1f: Would you support inclusion of 'Returning Fellowships' in the next phase of the Sêr Cymru programme?

- Yes

There is some overlap with other funders such as The Royal Society, Daphne Jackson Trust and Wellcome. However, these funds are rare and so support in this area would be welcome.

Question 1g: Would you support inclusion of 'National Research Networks' in the next phase of the Sêr Cymru programme?

- Yes

National Research Networks serve to encourage collaboration and are a beneficial component of the research and innovation ecosystem. It may be expeditious for achieving the spend target in year 1 to refresh and establish new NRNs.

If new NRNs are established they should be in line with the themes prioritised in the Welsh Government Innovation Strategy and highlighted in response to question 7 below.

Question 1h: Would you support inclusion of 'Funding for workshops and events' in the next phase of the Sêr Cymru programme?

- No

Opportunities for researchers to run workshops and/or symposia in areas relevant to their institutions and Welsh research is beneficial in bringing together researchers in similar fields and sharing best practice and ideas. However, in determining the balance of support within the programme, it would be taking account of the funding for workshops and events that can be accessed via other stakeholders, for example, the Learned Society for Wales.

Question 2: Where would you rank each of the components?

Please indicate a ranking number between 1 and 8, where 1 = top priority and 8 = lowest priority.

Please give a different ranking for each element, and explain your response further if you can.

- Capacity Building Awards   - 1
- Incoming International Fellowships - 7
- Outgoing International Fellowships - 8
- National and International Industry Academia Fellowships - 5
- PhD Studentships - 2
- Returning Fellowships programme - 3
- National Research Networks - 4

- Funding for workshops and events - 6

Given the financial pressures on the research sector, in particular caused by the withdrawal of EU Structural and Investment Funds, we would recommend focusing on mechanisms which could mitigate against some of the impacts such as loss of talent and capacity.

Question 3: Do you feel there are any components missing from the proposed funding programme?

- No

Given the limited pool of funding, the number of elements included so far would already stretch the fund fairly thinly and strategic decisions will need to be made on allocating funding to particular research areas. Adding further components risks reducing the impact of the funding further.

Question 4: Would you find it beneficial to have the option to propose a phased project, incorporating a number of components?

- Yes

Within defined research areas (see response to question 7), it would be beneficial to have the option to draw together several components within a single project plan and request for funding. This could enhance capacity and allow a more strategic use of the funding.

Question 5: Do you agree with 'Sêr Cymru National Institute of Advanced Studies (SCNIAS)' or 'Sêr Cymru IV' as the proposed title of the next phase of the programme?

- Sêr Cymru National Institute of Advanced Studies

Given the loss of talent caused by the loss of ESIF funding, there is an opportunity to focus the next phase of Sêr Cymru funding on retaining mid- to senior-career academics, to try to retain talent and make a clear statement about the value of academic researchers.

Framing this next phase as an Institute of Advanced Studies could be useful in this respect as the IAS concept is recognised within the sector as a means of promoting interdisciplinary thinking.

Question 6: Do you agree that a proposed outcome should be enhanced collaboration?

- No

Although enhanced collaboration may be an outcome of research, specifying the need for enhanced collaboration as a condition of funding at the outset could limit

funding requests from projects or academics where collaboration is already a fundamental component, or it may not be possible to measure how it is enhanced.

Answers to all parts of question 7 have been grouped:

Question 7: This question is about the proposed broad themes for the new programme detailed below:

Broad themes:

- life sciences
- health and social care
- low carbon and net zero
- energy
- environment and land use
- marine and fisheries
- biodiversity
- engineering
- tourism, sports, arts

Cross-cutting themes:

- social sciences
- digital
- Welsh language
- well-being

Question 7a: Where would you rank each of the broad themes? Please indicate a ranking number between 1 and 9 (1 = top priority and 9 = lowest priority)

Question 7b: Do you agree with the cross-cutting themes?

Question 7c: Do you feel any themes are missing (broad or cross-cutting)?

Rather than rank the themes proposed, we wish to draw attention to the thematic areas developed by the Wales Innovation Network.

The Wales Innovation Network has recently led work with Welsh Government to form a list of R&I projects across Wales. In compiling the list, WIN identified key thematic areas, which are (in no particular order):

These are (in no particular order):

• Digital transformation

• Net Zero and decarbonisation

- Agri-tech and rural economy

- Creative industries and media

- Population health and biotech

- Materials and manufacturing (including semiconductors)

- Empowering Welsh SMEs

- Welsh culture, language and heritage

Further to this, we would recommend the themes align to the Welsh Government's Innovation Strategy to ensure a joined-up approach to policies and mechanisms in the research and innovation ecosystem.

It's unclear how the cross-cutting themes would be implemented. If they are principles used to develop programmes, we can see the benefits of this approach.

However, if they become 'tick boxes' for individual proposals, that would risk reducing the quality of proposals (if they needed to show they met all of these) and could also risk not really addressing these cross-cutting themes either.

Question 8: What mechanisms could we put in place to make Sêr Cymru funding opportunities more attractive and accessible to a diverse range of applicants?

Mechanisms affording a degree of flexibility with which programmes can be taken up can make opportunities more attractive and accessible. For example flexibility in taking up a fellowship part-time over a longer period of time, allowing for a break (for example for parental leave) or being able to delay take up.

Contextually evaluating candidates' experience is also key to accessibility for a more diverse range of candidates. Facilitating movement between industry and academia is crucial to diversifying the research base so measuring experience beyond publications and research income (for example by using narrative CVs) could make Sêr Cymru funding more attractive and accessible.

Question 9: Is there anything else you wish to feedback about the proposed funding programme?

The overall funding pot for the next phase of Sêr Cymru is, by research standards, not particularly substantial. Given the challenging funding environment facing Welsh research at present with uncertainty over Horizon Europe association and the loss of ESIF funds, using Sêr Cymru funding strategically is more important than ever.

There is a risk that the £10m available could try to achieve too much and be spread too thinly across a range of research areas. Universities Wales suggests the funding be used on specific areas in line with the thematic areas identified by the Wales Innovation Network (see response to question 7), in order to better leverage and develop specific areas of Welsh expertise in research and innovation.

The focus of funding should avoid overlap with programmes funded elsewhere, and ideally be focussed on leveraging funding from other sources such as UKRI.

Question 10: Which stakeholder group would you consider yourself to represent

- Research organisations / academic institutions

Responses to questions 11 and 12 have been grouped below

Question 11: We would like to know your views on the effects that the next phase of the Sêr Cymru research funding programme would have on the Welsh language, specifically on opportunities for people to use Welsh and on treating the Welsh language no less favourably than English.

What effects do you think there would be? How could positive effects be increased, or negative effects be mitigated?

Question 12: Please also explain how you believe the proposed plan for the next phase of the Sêr Cymru research funding programme could be formulated or changed so as to have positive effects or increased positive effects on opportunities for people to use the Welsh language and on treating the Welsh language no less favourably than the English language, and, no adverse effects on opportunities for people to use the Welsh language and on treating the Welsh language no less favourably than the English language.

One of the thematic areas identified by the Wales Innovation Network is Welsh language and heritage. This reflects the strengths of Welsh universities in this area and so, through alignment with the thematic areas identified in response to question 7, will help further activity in this area.

It would also be helpful for Sêr Cymru to engage with the work of the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol in this area including through the research scholarships and training that they offer to bring positive effects on the opportunities for people to use the Welsh language in the research environment.

Question 13: We have asked a number of specific questions. If you have any related issues which we have not specifically addressed, please use this space to report them.