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18 January 2016

Dear Alison

**FULFILLING OUR POTENTIAL: TEACHING EXCELLENCE, SOCIAL MOBILITY AND STUDENT CHOICE - CONSULTATION**

The Nuffield Foundation has looked with interest at the Green Paper 'Fulfilling our potential: teaching excellence, social mobility and student choice' published by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) in November 2015. The implications of this document (and the related review of the UK research councils undertaken by Sir Paul Nurse) for the Nuffield Foundation, are many.

However, we did not feel that our views fitted easily with the consultation response format, hence this letter. Notwithstanding this, we have tried to set out our views in a way which aligns as closely as possible with two of the main strands of the consultation:

- a. Social mobility and widening participation.
- b. Reducing complexity and bureaucracy in research funding.

Before setting out how the Nuffield Foundation regards the proposals in the Green Paper, it may be helpful to say a little about the organisation. The Nuffield Foundation is a charitable trust established by William Morris, Lord Nuffield, the founder of Morris Motors. Our aim is to improve social well-being and we do this by:

- Funding research and innovation projects in education and social policy. In 2015 we funded 39 new projects with a total value of £4.9 million. Eighty per cent of these projects were based in universities.
- Building research capacity in science and social science, most notably through Q-Step, a £19.5m programme (co-funded with the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)) designed to promote a step-change in quantitative social science training for undergraduates.

## **a) Social mobility and widening participation**

Improving social mobility and widening participation is very close to the Nuffield Foundation's core mission. For example we have increased the proportion of post-16 students from disadvantaged backgrounds who undertake Nuffield Research Placements (NRP), and aim to continue this increase. These placements have a strong record of inspiring and motivating students to develop the skills and confidence they need to get a place at a top university and often to equip them better for careers in STEM and/or research.

In addition, evidence from independent research funded by the Foundation has informed a number of perspectives on widening participation. We believe consideration of this evidence would benefit discussion of the Green Paper proposals.

When students transfer from school to university, they are faced with many issues regarding choice – for example subjects of study and type of institution. There is evidence, which our projects are exploring further, that subject choices at school (which will determine to some extent access to higher education programmes) is socially stratified<sup>i</sup>. To make informed choices (which may reduce the transmission of inequality) students need ready access to intelligence concerning the impact of choosing particular areas of study (for example, the Russell Group 'facilitating subjects') at school and the potential impact on their opportunities beyond formal schooling.

Access to university for 'non-traditional entrants' has been growing over the past decade and more. Nuffield-funded work drew attention to the fact that the gap in participation between those from the richest and poorest families fell from 40 percentage points in 2004-05 to 37 percentage points in 2009-10<sup>ii</sup>. This reduction in the gap continued through the period when the tuition fee cap was raised to £3,000 in 2006-07. This may be a result of the support package being favourable to poorer students, but it may also reflect the greater awareness (of students) of the labour market premium attached to higher education. We have seen this effect with regard to mathematics<sup>iii</sup>. What is also clear is that to ensure equality of access and opportunity, students need to have reliable and straightforward information about options, something we will be following up in some recently funded research<sup>iv</sup>.

Evidence from research funded by the Foundation also shows the differences in social and cultural diversity between Russell Group and non-Russell group universities<sup>v</sup>. However, whilst there is no obvious relationship between ethnicity and the likelihood of applying to particular types of institution<sup>vi</sup>, there is an apparent lower probability of receiving an offer if candidates are from non-mixed 'race' minority groups (after taking into account academic attainment, family social class background, sex and the type of school attended). Other evidence suggests that ethnic and social segregation in universities in England was higher than that in Scotland and Wales<sup>vii</sup>.

In brief, our research highlights the importance of providing clear and accessible information at an early point in students' decision-making journeys, and of continuing to monitor and promote diversity (in terms of socio-economic background and ethnicity) across all higher education institutions.

## **b) Reducing complexity and bureaucracy in research funding**

The Green paper and the Nurse Review make some good and practical suggestions about the future of research support in the UK. We particularly welcome the continued backing for the dual-support system and would also highlight (as a closely related feature of this) the importance of HEFCE's 'Charity Support Fund', which we hope will continue to feature in its support for quality-related research funding.

The regular review of research quality in universities by a peer review-driven approach is very important to the Foundation, provided that it is carefully and transparently managed and mediated. The Foundation always uses a rigorous model of peer review to arrive at decisions about project funding and supports the use of peer review more widely. We

welcome the recognition given to this for securing excellence across the research landscape.

The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is very helpful to the Foundation in terms of providing evidence of an understanding of the quality and impact of work in particular fields (but could, perhaps, do more to address cross-disciplinary work). My colleague Teresa Williams (Director of Social Research and Policy) was a member of Main Panel C from January 2013. The Foundation has, for example, drawn upon REF 2014 outcomes when evaluating its Oliver Bird Rheumatism Programme (OBRP) and data from the previous Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) was used when we selected universities for this programme in 2004.

We note the Green Paper's support for the increased use of metrics in evaluating research quality. However, we are aware (and as the July 2015 'Metric Tide' report notes) that the humanities and social sciences, where most of our research funding is directed, are poorly represented by (for example) bibliometric data. Perhaps there ought to be more work to understand why this is the case before there is a stronger emphasis on this type of data when research quality is appraised.

The place of impact in the assessment of research quality has to be welcomed and should remain as a focal point of any future research assessment system. As a funder of research, it is something we are increasingly keen to understand. We are aware that this new feature of the REF has challenged many researchers and perhaps there is scope for greater joining up between Research UK (RUK) (if and when it comes into being) and the wider funding community in terms of concepts and definitions with regard to impact. In the spirit of both the Nurse Review and the Green Paper, this may reduce burdens and bureaucracy by improving the ease of 'read across' between research funded by different bodies. It may even help to promote more collaborative charity-RUK collaborative funding if it became easier to agree on impact and outcomes.

One point we would like to know more about in the context of the establishment of RUK concerns what Sir Paul Nurse describes as the 'particular care [to be] paid to ensuring there are strong interactions between the charitable research sector and the Research Councils'. In the transition to a new organisation and governance structure guiding RUK, perhaps more could be said about how this will be managed. It is possible that the embedding of the ESRC within RUK could slow down decision-making as its autonomy will inevitably be somewhat reduced. However, we can also see that this may be offset by the greater synergy with work supported by the other councils and improved cross-disciplinary opportunities.

In brief, we continue to support the maintenance of the dual-support system and a well-managed and transparent peer review-led approach to research appraisal. The relationship between funders like the Nuffield Foundation and the research councils has been strong and productive, including a number of significant partnerships of different scales, and we would like to ensure that continues. Where there are opportunities, around matters such as impact, to help the research community (and to improve public accountability) we would welcome opportunities to develop shared principles.

We hope you will find these views useful and would be very happy to provide more details on any of the issues discussed in this response. We are also willing to be involved in any subsequent work to develop the outcomes of the consultation.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Josh Hillman". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Josh Hillman

**Acting Director**

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## References

- <sup>i</sup> Anders, J. Socio-economic status. Subject choice 14 and university access. <http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/socio-economic-status-subject-choice-14-and-university-access>
- <sup>ii</sup> Dearden, L., Micklewright, J, Vignoles, A., Anders, J. and Crawford, C. Higher education funding and access: exploring common beliefs - <http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/higher-education-funding-and-access-exploring-common-beliefs>
- <sup>iii</sup> Davies, P. The effect of graduate earnings on 16-year-olds' subject choices - <http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/effect-graduate-earnings-16-year-olds%E2%80%99-subject-choices>
- <sup>iv</sup> Delavande, A., Fumagalli, L., and Zafar, B. Information, Expectations and Transition to Higher Education - <http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/information-expectations-and-transition-higher-education>
- <sup>v</sup> Demack, S. How do social differences affect HE aspirations and participation? - <http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/how-do-social-differences-affect-he-aspirations-and-participation>
- <sup>vi</sup> Shiner, M., Noden, P. and Modood, T. Black and minority ethnic access to HE - <http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/black-and-minority-ethnic-access-he>
- <sup>vii</sup> Raffe, D. and Croxford, L. Changing transitions to a differentiated HE system - <http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/changing-transitions-differentiated-he-system>