

British Academy Small Research Grants: an anniversary worth celebrating

FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY

In May 1963, the British Academy's newly established 'Research Fund Committee' awarded the first research grants from the Academy's new 'Research Fund' – financed by a grant from government that had been negotiated a year earlier. The Committee awarded grants to 44 research projects, with an average value of less than £500 (equivalent to £8,000 in today's money).

Small research grants are especially valuable to scholars in the humanities and social sciences, as many academics – particularly in the humanities – work independently. The British Academy's Small Research Grants scheme has provided a valuable resource for talented scholars to test research ideas, travel to pursue original research opportunities, or carry out small, discrete projects they would otherwise be unable to fund. This flexible scheme providing modest sums for pieces of innovative research differs from other major funding schemes, such as those run by the Research Councils, which offer large-scale project funding for teams of researchers and equipment – vital in scientific research, but less necessary for much work in the humanities and social sciences.

In the academic year 2011-12 (in two rounds of applications), nearly 500 awards were made to scholars for travel and research expenses. And the value of a Small Research Grant can now be up to £10,000.

The Pilgrim Trust, and the Rockefeller Report

Although the British Academy had been able to provide some modest support before then, it was in the early 1950s that the Academy began its first significant involvement in funding research throughout the UK. It operated a programme – funded by a private grant from the Pilgrim Trust – which offered small grants to scholars who were otherwise unable to secure funds to conduct personal programmes of research. This was intentionally set up as a pilot-scheme, to reveal the scale of demand within universities, museums, art galleries and elsewhere for this kind of support, and to establish a set of procedures for administering such a scheme. The grant from the Pilgrim Trust, initially awarded for a three year period, was twice renewed, in recognition of the quality of the research funded under the programme, and in view of the gathering momentum for demonstrating to the Treasury the clear necessity for government support.

¹ *Research in the Humanities and the Social Sciences: Report of a Survey by the British Academy, 1958–1960* (British Academy/Oxford University Press, 1961).

² A fuller narrative of these events is provided by chapters on 'The Pilgrim Trust pilot-scheme' and 'The Rockefeller Report and its sequel', in

In 1958, the Rockefeller Foundation made available a grant of £6,000 for the Academy to conduct a systematic review of the provision for research in the humanities and social sciences in the UK. A committee of Fellows of the British Academy was appointed to carry out the review, plus a full-time secretary. During the course of three years, the committee took evidence from a wide range of sources, and conducted visits to the United States, Canada, France, Germany and Holland to acquire comparative information from foreign academies and grant-giving bodies.

The Rockefeller Report, published in 1961, made a compelling case for a better national mechanism for supporting research in the humanities and social sciences.¹ The Academy pressed home its arguments in a 'lively and informal' face-to-face discussion with the Financial Secretary of the Treasury. And at the British Academy's annual general meeting in 1962, the President, Sir Maurice Bowra, was able to announce that the Treasury had agreed an annual grant to the Academy of £25,000, with a promise of an early increase to £50,000.²

The first awards in 1963

At its meeting in May 1963, the Research Fund Committee – on the basis of the specialist advice of its subject 'Sections' – approved research grants for 44 projects, totalling £20,735. The bald project titles – all that now survives from once detailed project proposals – are both tantalisingly vague and intriguingly exotic. Successful projects included:

Union Catalogue of Foreign Law	£750
Register of Business Archives	£100
Ethnography in New Guinea	£300
Kurdish-English Dictionary	£750
British Bronze Age	£325
Ethical concept of sin	£350
Computer tests in Greek textual criticism	£365
International inventory of musical sources	£750
Archaeology in Southern Rhodesia	£500
Social changes – Italian Land Reform	£150

Sources of funding

The amount of government-sourced money that the Academy was able to disburse in research grants grew significantly in the following decades. But other sources

Mortimer Wheeler's *The British Academy 1949-1968* (British Academy/Oxford University Press, 1970). A more general historical overview of the Academy's 'Support for Research' is given in *The British Academy 1902-2002: Some Historical Documents and Notes* (2002), pp. 21–9.

Featured in previous issues of the British Academy Review (BAR)

British Academy Small Research Grants have enabled ...



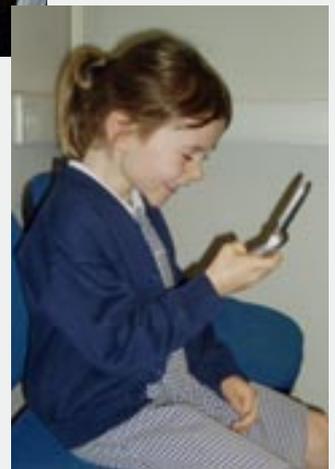
... Dr Jeremy Lester to study the urban slums of South America (BAR issue 12)



... Professor Caroline Knowles to explore complex global interactions by following the life-journey of a pair of flip-flops (BAR 12)



... Dr Colin Irwin to develop the use of 'peace polls' as an aid to conflict resolution in some of the world's most troubled regions (BAR 13)



... Dr Clare Wood and colleagues to investigate the impact of texting on childrens' literacy skills (BAR 14)



... Dr Liz Walker to study the parenting experiences of fathers who had spent time in prison (BAR 15)



... Dr Chantal Conneller and colleagues to excavate Britain's earliest house (BAR 16)



... Professor Andy Miah and Dr Beatriz Garcia to study the media coverage surrounding past Olympic Games (BAR 15)



... Dr Caroline Page to research the involvement of Australia and New Zealand in the Vietnam War (BAR 15)

have been cultivated as well. For 30 years (since 1982), the Sir Ernest Cassel Educational Trust has generously helped to fund the overseas travel costs of early-career scholars applying under the Small Research Grants scheme; one of the very first of these travel grants was awarded to one Dr Mary Beard, for a visit to Rome to conduct research into 'Recent discoveries in Roman inscriptions'.

In addition to such support from private trusts and foundations, bequests or other gifts to the Academy have created small funds, typically with a specific subject focus, adding to the resources available for Small Research Grants over the years. One such example is the Elisabeth Barker Fund, established by her family in her memory after her death in 1986, which supports studies in recent European history. These 'restricted' funds are administered under the umbrella of the Small Research Grants programme to ensure that the awards maintain a consistent standard of excellence in research.

The Academy's Fellows peer review every application on a *pro bono* basis, as with all of the Academy's funding schemes – adding a great deal of value to the money invested and disbursed.³

Proven value

In 1999-2000, the Small Research Grants scheme was the subject of a review of 'British Academy Support for Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences'. The review showed that Small Research Grants were still as important as ever.⁴ Individual survey responses indicated the scheme's unique character:

- 'Small grants are important out of all proportion to their size in fostering original research'
- 'The small grants scheme is a lifeline to many researchers and the British Academy fulfils a role no other body does so specifically'
- 'The small grants scheme can make a real difference to a young scholar's career by offering just the right seed corn help'
- 'The reputation of the British Academy carries weight, and once I had a grant from the BA it enabled me to obtain grants from other sources'
- 'It is by far the most valuable scheme available to those who wish to carry out traditional research based on personal scholarship'.⁵

A formal evaluation of the Small Research Grants scheme, carried out by external consultants⁶ in 2010, demonstrated the impact of these relatively small sums of money. The grants greatly benefited the careers of the award-holders, and provided them with opportunities to extend their academic collaborations and networks. The funding was judged to stimulate new research ideas and lead to genuinely new discoveries and knowledge – subsequently published in a large volume of scholarly books and journal articles. And researchers were also able to communicate their findings to more general audiences, through talks, the media and

popular publications; and many found themselves being consulted as experts by government.

The 2010 evaluation also confirmed the extraordinary capacity of a British Academy Small Research Grant to unlock further funding from other sources, by bestowing a kitemark of excellence on award-holders and their research work. A 2012 study found that the total amount leveraged from other sources was approximately 28 times the value of the original grant.

In 2010-11 the Academy disbursed over £2.7m in Small Research Grants, and regarded this as constituting unrivalled value for money.

A new beginning

It was therefore disappointing when it became clear that such small grants schemes did not fit the priorities of the government's 2010 Spending Review, and the Academy found itself having to announce the discontinuation of its Small Research Grants. The news shocked the academic constituency.

The Academy reacted by establishing a special 'Research Fund' in 2011, to allow donations to be ring-fenced for its research funding programmes. Many Fellows of the British Academy have already contributed to this Fund, and strong vocal support from the Fellowship has also been a great help in making the case to save the scheme. An urgent approach was made to the Leverhulme Trust, who agreed to support the Small Research Grants programme with £500,000 per year for three years from 2012. The Academy also negotiated a change to the terms of its government funding to allow sums underspent in other research programmes (e.g. unclaimed or returned funding from its various research posts schemes) to be directed to the Small Research Grants. The sums available are much reduced compared to 2010 levels, but the Academy has been able to relaunch its Small Research Grants scheme.

In the 50-year history of the Academy's small-scale research funding, nearly 15,000 awards have been made, with a total value of over £60,000,000 in today's money. To ensure that this valuable programme can continue for another 50 years, the Academy needs to diversify further the sources of funds that the scheme can draw upon.

The British Academy is actively seeking support for its research programmes. The fundraising team would be delighted to hear from any potential supporters, whether individuals, trustees or corporate contacts. Please contact Jennifer Hawton, Development Officer (020 7969 5258 or j.hawton@britac.ac.uk). Donations can be made to the Academy online via www.justgiving.com/britac/donate

More information on the Small Research Grants scheme can be found at www.britac.ac.uk/funding/guide/srg.cfm

³ An analysis in 2012 estimated that Fellows of the British Academy gave over 30,000 hours of voluntary time in support of Academy activities in 2011/12.

⁴ *British Academy Support for Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences: Report of a Review 1999-2000* (2000). The review findings were summarised in 'Review of Research Support', *The British Academy Review*,

January-July 2000 (2000), pp. 47-9.

⁵ A further survey of past award-holders and the wider academic community, undertaken for the Academy by external consultants Evidence Ltd in 2006, confirmed that Small Research Grants remained 'the most highly rated scheme within the BA portfolio'.

⁶ People Science and Policy Ltd.