

# ESRC response to the strategic consultation exercise held in 2014

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## 1. Introduction

- 1.1 The ESRC published its Strategic Plan 2015 on 14 January 2015.
- 1.2 This document provides a response to the consultation held during 2014 to inform the development of our Strategic Plan 2015. It includes information about the submissions received to the consultation as well as our response. Whilst all submissions have been considered, this document does not attempt to set out a response to every single point raised. Instead, it concentrates on the key themes that emerged through the consultation, and explains how they have been taken into account in shaping our Strategic Plan.
- 1.3 The ESRC Strategic Plan 2015 is a high-level document that frames the future direction for ESRC. The Plan does not detail specific activity; this level of detail will be covered in the Delivery Plans we and other research councils will produce to reflect the outcome of the next government spending review. This approach is intended to enable us to be flexible and agile in responding to emerging scientific and policy agendas.
- 1.4 We expect to prepare a new Delivery Plan during 2015 which will cover 2016-2020 and will be updated annually. Our Delivery Plan will also be informed by the inputs we have received in the consultation exercise alongside other inputs.
- 1.5 ESRC's current Delivery Plan 2015-16 is published on our website (<http://www.esrc.ac.uk/news-and-events/publications/strategic-plan/index.aspx>).

## 2. About the consultation

- 2.1 The consultation involved: a written submission exercise held during June-July 2014, to which responses were received from all of our stakeholder communities; three

workshops with non-academic stakeholders held in October-November 2014; as well as various standing meetings held during the year including one with directors of large ESRC investments and another with learned societies.

- 2.2 In total, 151 responses were received to the written consultation - 92 representing the views of organisations and 59 from individuals. The majority of written submissions were from academic stakeholders (136), with a smaller number received from non-academic organisations (15). To supplement the input from non-academic stakeholders we held three lunchtime events that were attended by a further 39 individuals representing business, public sector and civil society organisations.
- 2.3 The ESRC is grateful to all respondents for taking the time to provide input during this period. The evidence we collected has been extremely valuable in shaping thinking on our future direction.

### **3. Response to key themes**

- 3.1 The key themes that emerged in the consultation are set out below. They are in no particular priority order as they represent the views of different stakeholder groups.

#### **Valuing the role of the ESRC**

- 3.2 Prominent across all responses was the perceived value of ESRC as a funder of independent, excellent social science including the underpinning data resources and capability that are essential to excellent social science. In addition, the responses indicated that our stakeholders also value the more nuanced aspects of our role including as: a champion for social science; a bridge between academic and non-academic stakeholders; and as a convener bringing researchers, institutions and funders together in networks and collaboration.

#### **Maintaining responsive mode**

- 3.3 Maintaining, and for some – increasing, responsive mode funding was the most common theme in responses from academic respondents. In summary, comments referred to the need to protect routes for curiosity-led ideas and innovative and ambitious research. Responsive mode is seen by many as essential to enabling ESRC to support a broad research portfolio.
- 3.4 Some academic respondents also commented that ESRC should offer more small grants, and the most common suggestion for what this might look like was a scheme specifically for early career researchers. Other suggested purposes for small grants included funding pilot studies, or to accelerate research findings by funding activity on shorter time-scales.

#### **Our response**

- 3.5 We are committed to funding excellent social science via the opportunities we offer as is stated in our Strategic Plan 2015. We recognise the importance of ensuring our portfolio includes curiosity-driven as well as more applied research, accepting that these are not mutually exclusive categories. As such we intend to maintain a balance between opportunities that support researcher-led ideas, as well as retaining the

agility to support challenge-orientated research. Our Strategic Plan 2015 also sets out our intention to encourage ambitious and innovative social science across all of our funding schemes, building upon the lessons learned from our Transformative Research scheme. We will also work with our peer review college, grant assessment panels, and the social science community more broadly to communicate this message and ensure our appetite for risk is clear to reviewers.

- 3.6 We are aware that ESRC responsive mode faces a major challenge and success rates for high scoring applications are not where we would wish them to be. This decline is due to a number of factors including an increase in standard grant application volume over the past two years, and an increase in average application costs (up by 42 per cent since 2008/09). We intend to look again at the thresholds in our standard grants scheme, and more generally to ensure our funding opportunities are straightforward for researchers applying. That said, we are committed to our policy of funding longer, larger awards for social science, and do not therefore intend to re-introduce small grants or reduce the current lower threshold for standard grants. It is perhaps worth noting here that our decision to discontinue the previous small grants scheme was made on the basis of an independent evaluation which found no evidence that small grants were predominantly being used as a funding route by early career researchers. The decision was also based on the availability of other sources for small amounts of research funding, and our need to prioritise those funding schemes where we can add most value. Our response on support for early career researchers is covered under 'Developing social science capability' below.
- 3.7 An ultimate aim, which we set out in our Strategic Plan, is to secure adequate resources to bring our success rate in line with that of the other research councils for applications judged to be of equivalent quality. Our ability to achieve this however will be determined by the outcome of the next spending review and our budget beyond 2015/16.

### **Emphasising interdisciplinary, challenge-led research**

- 3.8 A call for more interdisciplinary challenge-led research came through responses from all stakeholder groups and was the dominant theme in non-academic responses. This included strong support for greater collaboration working within and across the research councils – both in responsive mode and in specific challenge areas. It also included facilitating productive problem-focused collaboration, both in the UK and internationally, across sectors as well as across disciplines.

### **Our response**

- 3.9 The research councils work collectively to ensure that interdisciplinary research is supported through all funding routes, and there is a clear process in place for responsive mode applications that cross the boundaries of one or more council. That said, there is always room for improvement, and we accept that occasionally the system may not work optimally. Where this is felt to be the case we would ask that the detail of such examples be referred to us.
- 3.10 The ESRC has long been a champion of interdisciplinary research, recognising that social science is fundamental to many, if not all, challenges facing society. This

includes interdisciplinary work within the social sciences, for example that supported by the longitudinal studies we fund such as Understanding Society. We also play a central role in a number of cross-Council collaborations, and participate in programmes of activity with Innovate UK and a range of other partners in the UK and internationally.

- 3.11 As is set out in our Strategic Plan, we intend to continue to work in partnership across a number of areas both to identify as well as to deliver social science in priority areas. We are currently liaising with colleagues across the research councils and in Innovate UK to develop a number of new challenge areas that will form a key part of Research Council delivery plan bids in the comprehensive spending review later this year. We are also collaborating with a range of partners internationally, including as part of the delivery of the Newton Fund. In the coming year we also intend to explore new approaches to ensuring the needs of non-academic stakeholders are informing our work on an on-going basis.

### **Greater synthesis of existing evidence**

- 3.12 A number of the responses, including the majority of non-academic responses, called for more high quality research synthesis and translational work; to evaluate and package research evidence in ways that make it accessible and useful to policymakers and practitioners. Many of the comments made in this area mention the need to build capability amongst researchers in summarising and communicating research findings

### **Our response**

- 3.13 The ESRC has placed emphasis on research evidence in recent years. This includes the key role we have played in the What Works initiative designed to inform decision making in public services. It also includes more agile models of working to promote independent research evidence in public dialogue and decision making in policy and practice such as the Future of the UK and Scotland initiative. We have extended this approach further in recent initiatives such as UK in a Changing Europe and Urban Transformations.
- 3.14 Our Strategic Plan highlights research synthesis as a type of activity we will continue to support and promote, including building capability in this area. We will continue to champion the core aim of the What Works initiative, mobilising knowledge for frontline policymakers, practitioners and service commissioners, while supporting co-production and emerging innovative approaches to effective knowledge mobilisation.

### **Enhancing the exploitation of data**

- 3.15 The responses to the consultation included widespread support for the value-added role ESRC plays in supporting a robust data infrastructure for social science including the development of world-leading longitudinal studies. Respondents also commented positively on ESRC securing additional capital funding in recent years to further develop this infrastructure. For example a number of non-academic respondents referenced ESRC's important role as an independent third party enabling access and exploitation of data that would otherwise remain untapped for research.

- 3.16 The responses across all stakeholder groups suggested that further opportunities and guidance are needed to promote broader access to, and exploitation of the data. Responses also called for a continued focus on building the analytical capacity required to make best use of the data.

### **Our response**

- 3.17 The ESRC has long taken a clear lead in establishing a robust data infrastructure for social science, and we aim to continue to do so by developing key resource investments and providing the tools and resources to enable their exploitation.
- 3.18 We are pleased to have been able to extend the ESRC data infrastructure in a number of important ways in recent years. This has included developing and extending our portfolio of longitudinal studies and introducing the Big Data Network, thereby expanding access to administrative and business sources of data for research whilst protecting the anonymity of individuals.
- 3.19 We have also consolidated and developed the central support for researchers accessing ESRC data investments - including UK Data Service and CLOSER – in order to maximise its use. In addition, we have sought to ensure appropriate governance is in place to guide and advice on the development and sustainability of the data infrastructure.
- 3.20 From here we intend to sustain this investment whilst also supporting its full exploitation, building upon opportunities such as the Secondary Data Analysis Initiative. For this reason, maximising the data infrastructure is a central aim in our Strategic Plan. This includes a continued commitment to developing the research capabilities required to lead these investments as well as those needed to fully exploit the breadth of data available, including unstructured textual data. It also includes working with the other Research Councils and Innovate UK to ensure that the UK social science infrastructure is seen as part of a broader UK data environment that underpins research across all areas of the science base.

### **Developing social science capability including support for early career researchers**

- 3.21 There was considerable support amongst academic responses for the role ESRC plays in building capability; most specifically postgraduate funding and support for early career researchers. This includes support for ESRC's shift to a Doctoral Training Network and a wish to see the network establish itself further. There was also encouragement to build capability to meet the future needs of social science whether that is research leadership; analytical capacity; and/or emerging areas of science.
- 3.22 Support for early career researchers, particularly those at the transition from PhD to postdoctoral researcher/academic, was a further dominant theme in the responses from academic organisations and individuals.

3.23 Furthermore, responses across all stakeholder groups reflected that we are increasingly demanding more from social scientists beyond their individual areas of expertise including but not limited to: the ability to work collaboratively, lead large-scale projects and teams, and be excellent communicators of research. We know from our evaluation evidence that these are the capabilities that underpin excellence and impact.

### **Our response**

- 3.24 Building UK social science capability is a core aspect of our role and our continued commitment in this area is reflected in our 2015 Strategic Plan.
- 3.25 We intend to continue to support excellent postgraduate training through a network of universities and, following an independent evaluation exercise in 2014 are preparing plans to commission the second phase of the network beyond 2016. These plans have been informed by a range of evidence including the evaluation, this consultation exercise, and the outcome of the Demographic Review refresh. Information about this process will be available on our website shortly.
- 3.26 We are also keen to ensure opportunities for early career researchers that address the needs of this varied group as well as complement other opportunities available. Our Strategic Plan commits to expanding support for early career researchers and over the coming months we will be looking at ways in which this can be achieved, working with other social science funders. We have made some changes to the eligibility criteria for the existing Future Leaders Scheme in the most recent call, and will want to review the outcomes of the latest round as part of our deliberations.
- 3.27 Furthermore, in our Strategic Plan we highlight our intention to better support the development of social science capability in strategic areas including: leadership (of research and data investment); analytical capability; collaboration; and the ability to synthesise and communicate research findings in ways that are useful to research users. In the coming year we intend to explore further how we can achieve this, working with other funders and users of social science research.