ESRC Research Methods Development Grants (2020)
Call specification

Summary

The Economic and Social Research Council is pleased to invite proposals for methods development grants to support the social science community to work collaboratively across sectors and disciplines to address common methodological challenges. Proposals must aim to achieve at least one of the following:

- Develop new methods
- Apply existing methods in a novel way
- Develop our understanding of a methodological challenge and scope the new research activity required to address it.

The aim of the call is to support the social sciences to respond effectively to the methodological challenges arising in a changing, highly interdisciplinary research and funding environment. In particular, these grants are designed to facilitate the development of partnerships to work across organisational and disciplinary boundaries. Through this call we expect to enable the exploratory and incremental steps needed to develop a methodological challenge or idea enabling a fuller methodological innovation proposal to be prepared where needed. We welcome proposals for projects requiring seed funding to develop new partnerships and activities may include proof of concept work; small research projects; seminar series; and strategic networks.

This call is part of a broader suite of ESRC-funded activities and is intended to address a specific need whilst complementing other funding opportunities available through our responsive mode and other strategic calls. It is also our intention to run a further call in late 2021/early 2022 to fund substantive methodological research projects. This later call may offer a pathway for the further development of ideas and concepts explored by projects funded under this call.

Proposals for this call should set out a coherent package of activities that are intended to advance a methodological challenge within the social sciences. It must include a collaboration outside of academia or with researchers working in a disciplinary area beyond the social sciences. Proposals must identify these collaborators and include them as either co-investigators or projects partners.

We are working in partnership with Administrative Data Research UK (ADR UK) and this call includes a strategic steer to support proposals that address a methodological challenge related to their core mission: to join up the abundance of administrative data already being created by government and public bodies across the UK, and make it available for vital research that has the potential to lead to better
informed policy decisions and more effective public services. Applicants who wish to apply to this steer should clearly highlight in their Case for Support how their proposal fits this criteria. Proposals must also meet the general call requirements set out in this document. Please note that grants funded through the ADR UK strategic steer must end by 31 March 2022.

Grants funded under the main strand of this call must be a maximum of 18 months in duration. Researchers can apply for up to £200,000 (100% fEC) of which ESRC will pay 80%; this funding limit applies to both the main strand and the strategic steer.

Researchers interested in applying to this call are asked to indicate their interest by completing an Intention to Submit form no later than **16:00 on 26 March 2020**. Full proposals must be submitted via the Joint Electronic Submission System (Je-S) by **16:00 on 11 June 2020**.

Applicants must be based at a Research Organisation eligible for research council funding; all applicants should consult the ESRC Research Funding Guide, which sets out the rules and regulations governing funding. The ‘Je-S Guidance’ document provides details on the information that applicants are required to submit as part of their proposal.

**Background and scope**

ESRC has invested in methods development and innovation over a long period of time, most notably through the training and research delivered through the National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM) but also through our centres competition and responsive mode schemes. Our ongoing commitment to investing in this area is set out in our Delivery Plan (PDF, 7.5MB), and we have recently announced further funding for NCRM. In its new phase, the Centre’s principal aim will be to increase research methods capability in the social sciences and beyond through innovative training and capacity-building activities in the application of core and advanced research methods techniques.

We will continue to support methodological development in the social sciences, with opportunities offered through our responsive mode complemented by targeted calls. This new call is one part of our broader investment and focuses on working in collaboration across sectors and disciplines. This opportunity reflects the changing nature of research and the evolving funding environment which increasingly recognises that major scientific discoveries and the potential to deliver positive social benefits are, in the future, likely to develop at the intersections between disciplinary and sector boundaries. This was a key driver behind the creation of UKRI and is reflected in the creation of new cross-cutting funds. We want to support the social science research community to work across disciplinary and sectoral boundaries to address methodological challenges.

Looking forward, the evolving research landscape necessitates further methodological innovation and development. For example, what are the methodological developments required to take advantage of and address the challenges with the use of new and emerging forms of data for the social sciences; can artificial intelligence and machine learning enhance social science research
methods; what methodological innovation is needed to ensure the use of linked administrative data sources in social science research is maximised; do we need novel or reconceptualised methods (including sampling techniques and analytical frameworks) to address research pertaining to human interactions with digital and online technologies including the impact of social media on young people and their mental health? There are also long-standing and cross-cutting methodological challenges relating to the use of real-time data in social science research; causality; representativeness; using modelling and simulation; and power relations that continue to need attention.

Through this call we want to fund development grants that enable researchers to experiment in new ways to provide the methodological advances required to address the major challenges facing the UK. It is our intention to run a further call in late 2021/early 2022 to fund substantive methodological research projects. This later call may offer a pathway for the further development of ideas and concepts explored by projects funded under this call. Alternatively, opportunities through our responsive mode and other strategic calls may offer a more appropriate route to further funding.

Aims and objectives of the call

The aim of the call is to build the capacity within the social sciences to enable researchers to respond effectively to the methodological challenges facing the social sciences in a changing research environment. However, such challenges are increasingly interdisciplinary and require cross-sector collaboration in order for new insights to deliver real world impacts. Grants funded under this call will support and facilitate the development of the strategic networks and partnerships required by social scientists to work across organisational and disciplinary boundaries.

We are inviting proposals for methods development grants to support methodological innovation within the social sciences. Activities funded may be in the form of proof of concept work; the piloting of new approaches; small research projects; or the creation of networks to address a shared methodological challenge.

Through this call we expect to enable the exploratory and incremental steps needed to develop a methodological challenge or idea enabling a fuller methodological innovation proposal to be prepared where needed. Funding will also foster meaningful and lasting interdisciplinary collaborations that reach beyond the social sciences and broker or sustain cross-sector partnerships. Connecting expertise across disciplines and sectors will increase the potential for impact by facilitating the transfer of ideas along with greater awareness and uptake of new methodological approaches and applications.

Call details and requirements

Proposals should present a programme of work that will advance a methodological challenge in the social sciences, clearly setting out how the outputs and outcomes of the proposed activities will contribute to this goal. Projects could be used as seed funding to develop a new partnership and potential activities might include proof of
concept work, a small research project, seminar series\(^1\) and/or strategic networks\(^2\). These suggestions are illustrative and applicants are required to specify and justify their proposed approach. Proposals can focus on one or multiple activities but must present a coherent package of activity underpinned by the objective to advance a methodological challenge within the social sciences. We expect to see a variety and breadth of activity in the proposals we receive.

Proposals must aim to achieve at least one of the following:

- Develop new methods
- Apply existing methods in a novel way
- Develop our understanding of a methodological challenge and scope the new research activity required to address it

Where activities involving the wider community are proposed, proposals should explain how different groups of participants (such as academics, research students, new researchers and research users), will be identified and involved. Details should be provided of plans for promoting activities and any follow-up action for maintaining contact with participants should also be detailed. Proposals for establishing new networks must set out how they will be sustained after the grant has come to an end.

Successful projects will fall across a spectrum. Whilst all will have an identified need, for some, further scoping activity will be required to move forward thinking on a particular challenge. Other projects will be looking to test more developed ideas. We expect to fund a range of projects addressing both experimental and incremental needs. Proposals must evidence that the methodological innovation proposed is appropriate and of high potential impact for social science. The benefits to the partner should also be articulated in your proposal.

Proposals must include a collaboration from outside of academia or with researcher(s) working in a disciplinary area outside of the social sciences. Applicants can seek a new collaboration or develop and advance an existing partnership(s). All proposals must justify why funding is needed to enable the collaboration. Applicants proposing to work with a non-academic partner are expected to demonstrate that they have explored co-funding for the project from the organisation they are collaborating with on the project. This can be a financial or in-kind contribution and should reflect the maturity of the relationship. Expectations will be higher for those with stronger links.

Collaborators must be identified in the proposal and included either as a co-investigator or project partner. Business, voluntary sector or government body co-investigators based in the UK can be included on research grant proposals. Please refer to the business, third sector and government co-investigators policy for further information.

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\(^1\) Seminar groups meet regularly to exchange information and ideas with the aim of advancing research within their fields.

\(^2\) Strategic networks have the central aim of generating and developing innovative, interdisciplinary and user collaborations focused on potential new priority areas. Networks are built through a wider range of activities than seminars.
This call offers researchers considerable flexibility to focus on any methodological challenge(s) providing that it falls within ESRC’s remit. Proposals are welcomed from across the full breadth of the social sciences. Whilst we encourage proposals to draw from the wider sciences, social sciences must represent more than 50 per cent of the research focus and effort.

The funding and duration of projects should be proportionate with the objectives of the grant and fully justified within your proposal. The budgets and timescales permitted under the call are intended to offer flexibility so that the most appropriate activity can be proposed to address the research need as well as to encourage the widest pool of applicants. Applicants are reminded that we intend to run a further call in late 2021/early 2022 to fund substantive methodological research projects. This subsequent competition may offer a pathway for the further development of ideas and concepts explored by projects funded under this call.

We would like to work with successful applicants to share learning from projects funded through this call. Applicants should demonstrate their willingness to contribute to this activity in their proposals. Grant holders will also be expected to participate in wider activities co-ordinated by ESRC to raise awareness of the value of social science research methods.

**ADR UK strategic steer**

We are working in partnership with Administrative Data Research UK (ADR UK) who are interested in supporting proposals that address a methodological challenge related to their core mission: to join up the abundance of administrative data already being created by government and public bodies across the UK, and make it available for vital research that has the potential to lead to better informed policy decisions and more effective public services. See the ADR UK website for more information on their areas of work, from improving education and healthcare to tackling crime, as well as up and coming information on methodological interests. An additional £440k (100% fEC) is available to support grants under this steer and ESRC will pay 80% of the costs.

Applicants should clearly highlight in their Case for Support if they consider their proposal to fit these criteria. Proposals must also meet the general call requirements set out in this document. Please note that grants funded through the ADR UK strategic steer must end by 31 March 2022.

Submissions to this strategic steer will be assessed separately by the commissioning panel. The eligibility of proposals to this strategic steer will be checked by ADR UK as part of our office checks. Those not considered to be relevant to their core mission will be moved to the general proposal pool and assessed alongside applications submitted under the wider call.

Proposals investigating methodological challenges in the use of administrative data in social science research but that do not meet the requirements of the strategic steer are still able to apply to this call but will be assessed alongside applications submitted under the wider call.
Impact

From 1 March 2020, applicants to all UKRI calls and schemes will no longer be required to provide a ‘Pathways to Impact’ attachment, nor to complete an ‘Impact Summary’ within grant applications. Impact remains a key element of both the application and assessment process across all ESRC calls and schemes and will be assessed as part of the Case for Support.

In line with the UKRI position on Excellence with Impact, applicants are expected to have considered the potential scientific, societal and economic impacts of their proposal and how these impacts can be maximised and developed. ESRC applicants should actively consider how these impacts can be maximised and developed within their proposal. Applicant’s plans to maximise and develop the potential impacts of their research will form part of the assessment process.

Opportunities for making an impact may arise, and should be taken, at any stage during research lifecycle: the planning and research design stage; the period of funding and all activities that relate to the project up to - and including - the time when funding has ended. The research lifecycle therefore includes knowledge exchange and impact realisation activities - including reporting and publication, and the archiving, future use, sharing, and linking of data. It is important that researchers have in place a robust strategy for maximising the likelihood of impact opportunities and their own capacity for taking advantage of these.

It is important to set out how you intend to identify and actively engage relevant users of the research and stakeholders (within and beyond the academic community including, for instance, the public sector, private sector, civil society or the wider public in general) and include evidence of any existing engagement with relevant end users. You should articulate a clear understanding of the context and needs of these users and consider ways for the proposed research to meet or impact upon these needs. The proposal should also outline how the legacy of proposed activity will be managed to engage beneficiaries and increase the likelihood of its impact in providing lasting value to participants, stakeholders and the wider social science community.

To be effective, all communication, engagement and impact activities must be planned in detail and properly resourced in the proposal.

Excellent research without obvious or immediate societal or economic impact will not be disadvantaged in the assessment process. If you consider that your research has no obvious or immediate societal or economic impact, you should explain your reasoning in the Case for Support.

The ESRC’s Impact Toolkit gives you detailed advice on how to achieve the maximum impact for your work. The toolkit includes information on developing an impact strategy, promoting knowledge exchange, public engagement and communicating effectively with your key stakeholders.

Demand management
We anticipate that this call will receive significant interest. In accordance with our demand management strategy, we encourage research organisations to consider carefully the number and quality of proposals that are submitted.

If your proposal does not centrally address the key requirements set out above, you should not submit it to this call. You may instead wish to consider submitting to ESRC’s standard Research Grants call.

**Budget**

A total budget of £2m is available for this call (100 per cent fEC, with ESRC’s contribution £1.6m) and we expect to fund approximately 15 - 20 development grants. Grants must be a maximum of 18 months in duration, and applicants can apply for up to £200,000 (of which ESRC will pay 80%). An additional £440k (100% fEC) is available to support grants under the strategic steer. Grants funded under the steer must be completed by 31 March 2022.

Costs for associated studentships are not eligible.

**How to apply**

**Intention to submit**

Researchers interested in applying to this call are asked to submit an Intention to Submit form no later than 16:00 on 26 March 2020. Information collected through this process will be used for planning purposes only and will inform the arrangements we make to assess applications. You are still eligible to apply to the call if you have not submitted a form.

**Full proposals**

Full proposals must be submitted via the Joint Electronic Submission System (Je-S) by 16:00 on 11 June 2020.

Applicants must be registered with Je-S to submit a proposal and should refer to the attached detailed guidance for making Je-S applications. If you are not currently Je-S registered and intend to apply, please ensure that you allow sufficient time for registration as no extensions to the deadline will be permitted. Hard-copy, faxed or email applications will not be accepted.

Applicants must be based at a Research Organisation eligible for research council funding; see the [UKRI eligibility webpage](https://www.ukri.org) for a list of eligible organisations. All applicants should consult the ESRC [Research Funding Guide](https://www.esrc.ac.uk), which sets out the rules and regulations governing funding. The ‘Je-S Guidance’ document provides details on the information that applicants will require to submit as part of their proposal.

Eligible proposals will be assessed by a specially constituted expert panel. It is expected that the panel meeting will take place in September 2020 and applicants will be notified of their funding decision in October 2020.
It is expected that successful grants will commence from 1 January 2021 and no later than 1 March 2021, for a period of up to 18 months.

**Assessment Criteria**

Proposals will be assessed based on the following criteria:

- Originality/potential contribution to knowledge
- Fit to the scope of the call
- Design, partnership working and engagement approach
- Outputs, dissemination and impact
- Value for money

When recommending proposals for funding, the commissioning panel may take a portfolio approach to funding decisions and consider regional spread.

**Commissioning timetable** (amended 6 April 2020)

- Call announced – 17 February 2020
- Deadline for submitting Intention to Submit forms – 26 March 2020
- Closing date for proposals – 11 June 2020
- Panel assessment – September 2020
- Decision to applicants – October 2020
- Projects start – 1 January 2021 – 1 March 2021

**Contacts**

Any enquiries relating to this specification or ESRC research funding rules should be e-mailed to [MethodsDevelopment@esrc.ukri.org](mailto:MethodsDevelopment@esrc.ukri.org).

Any enquiries relating to the Je-S application procedure should be addressed to the Je-S Helpdesk at:

- Email: [jeshelp@je-s.ukri.org](mailto:jeshelp@je-s.ukri.org)
- Telephone: 01793 444164