

ESRC Longitudinal Studies Review 2017 Specification

This specification belongs to the Review Steering Group and its purpose is to inform the Review Panel, setting out the purpose, objectives of the review and the deliverables required. It is also to inform Council and other stakeholders in the review, including other funders.

Background

It is timely to carry out a strategic review of the ESRC's investment in longitudinal resources including the continued and future scientific relevance, sustainability, and contribution to the wider portfolio of social science and interdisciplinary data and resources in the UK and internationally.

Our funding environment is changing, as is the availability of data, and as we move forward into UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-research-and-innovation-business-case>) it is time for ESRC to take stock, look forward and review the scientific need for longitudinal studies.

Longitudinal studies are often seen as a flagship component of the social science data resources we fund, and form a core part of our strategic plan (<http://www.esrc.ac.uk/news-events-and-publications/publications/corporate-publications/strategic-plan/>). They have proved their worth in addressing scientific questions of central importance (<http://www.esrc.ac.uk/research/research-and-impact-evaluation/economic-impact-reports/>) to individual and societal wellbeing and been major aids to policymakers, as the only means for studying processes of individual life-course development and dynamics, and the effects of earlier characteristics and experiences on later outcomes. ESRC makes significant annual and long term investment in longitudinal studies and related resources.

We need a clear vision for the future of our commitment in this area so that we can make the case for investment in our portfolio that remains relevant to research and policy communities, that our investments will continue to evolve and innovate to keep the UK at the global forefront of methods and research, that they connect appropriately to the rapidly developing data-for-research landscape, and that they deliver value for money.

The last strategic review of our longitudinal studies reported in 2006 (<http://www.esrc.ac.uk/files/news-events-and-publications/news/2016/strategic-review-of-panel-and-cohort-studies-2006/> (PDF)). Since then, ESRC has continued its investment in the Centre for Longitudinal Studies (<http://www.cls.ioe.ac.uk/>) as well as investing in new studies including Understanding Society (<https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/>) and Life Study (<http://www.lifestudy.ac.uk/>) (discontinued). Additionally, ESRC has invested strategically in other longitudinal resources including the Census longitudinal studies (<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/celsius>), Next Steps (<http://www.cls.ioe.ac.uk/nextsteps/>), CLOSER (<http://www.closer.ac.uk/>), and UK ageing studies NICOLA (<https://www.qub.ac.uk/sites/NICOLA/>) and HAGIS (<http://www.hagis.scot/>), as well as research projects that make extensive use of the longitudinal data including the International Centre for Lifecourse Studies (<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/icls>). Further, we co-ordinate funding for ELSA (<http://www.elsa-project.ac.uk/>), co-fund Born in Bradford

(<http://www.borninbradford.nhs.uk/>) and are continually involved in discussions with other funders about contributions to other studies. Investment has used both responsive mode research funding and capital infrastructure funding.

The context in which these large surveys are undertaken is changing in a number of respects, including changes in the research councils' funding environment and preparations for the establishment in 2018 of UKRI, shifting attitudes towards participation in such studies, survey costs, and technological and policy advances in data acquisition and linkage, including administrative data and biomarkers; examples include ADRN (<https://adrn.ac.uk/>), the Farr Institute (<http://www.farrinstitute.org/>) and UKBiobank (<http://www.ukbiobank.ac.uk/>). It is essential that future research data provision meets interdisciplinary needs and that the ESRC works with the MRC and other funders. The review will need to scope out the potential of data linkage, including use of administrative, biomarker and genetic data, the barriers to linkage and how, how far and when these could realistically be overcome.

Aims and objectives

The aim of this review is to provide an evidence-based and challenge-led assessment of the future social and interdisciplinary scientific and policy-relevant needs for data to address the types of research questions for which longitudinal data has typically been used (or could be used), and the value of the life-course evidence from our longitudinal studies in comparison with other sources of evidence. It will provide an assessment of the feasibility and effectiveness of alternative options for delivering the evidence needed, through exploration of trade-offs between options or combinations of options, and costs and benefits of each, under certain specified conditions. The review will need to address the questions how research and policy-relevant needs could be met without continuing investment in longitudinal studies, and what of value would be missing without them. It will need to be mindful of uncertainties about the future context, including Research Council funding and key issues such as access to routine data.

The review will form a core contribution to the development of our vision for longitudinal studies and related resources the next 10 years and beyond. It will provide us with the evidence we need to support future social science investment in longitudinal infrastructure as we move forward into UKRI.

The review, which builds on the ESRC 2006 Strategic Review of Panel and Cohort Studies (<http://www.esrc.ac.uk/files/news-events-and-publications/news/2016/strategic-review-of-panel-and-cohort-studies-2006/> (PDF)), will provide clear and realistic recommendations with reasoned priorities on how our longitudinal investments individually and collectively could best be positioned to meet the needs of future research and policy-making challenges, and criteria to guide our funding decisions. The recommendations will inform our strategy for longitudinal studies and future funding, management and commissioning decisions, including what to continue, to change, to stop and to start.

These recommendations will relate to our decisions about future support for individual longitudinal studies, and to the support for discoverability, comparability, innovation, and development of an interdisciplinary UK longitudinal studies community (currently supported by CLOSER), and to international opportunities. Recommendations could include to seek additional co-funding for particular studies, to focus support on particular studies or

particular topics where longitudinal data is most valuable, or to change the shape of the portfolio in other ways such as by reducing the frequency of data collection, changing the information that is collected, adopting new modes of data collection, starting a new study, or shifting from data collection to linkage. The recommendations need to take into account feasibility of practical realisation, and provide alternatives that can be applied in different conditions.

Rationale

The review will address the following questions:

1. What are the current and likely future scientific (including and beyond traditional user communities) and policy-related needs for data, including what types of data?
2. What and where, broadly, is the value and potential of the life-course data and other evidence from our current portfolio of longitudinal investments in meeting current and future scientific needs? This will draw on learning from case studies of key impacts from the longitudinal studies. What are the strengths and weaknesses in the studies' coverage (population and topics) and data quality? Where are the key limitations and gaps? Where, if anywhere, is there duplication?
3. How do our longitudinal resources fit with the broader national and international data infrastructure, looking ahead? What is their value in comparison with other sources? What is the realistic potential for research of linkage of administrative and biomarker data within the next 10 years?
4. How do and might our investments complement other resources? What are the gaps and overlaps, and how could these be addressed?
5. What can be learnt from other studies in the UK and internationally for our existing studies, for a potential new study/studies and by the ESRC?
6. What should be our future priorities for funding longitudinal data resources? How might we change or stop existing studies or focus on particular studies or areas? Should we start new studies or other related investments, with what focus? What infrastructure is needed, broadly, to realise the potential of the studies, including in combination with other data resources. The panel is invited to set out priorities in the scenarios of a substantial increase and decrease in funding as well as with no change.
7. What should be the key considerations in commissioning a study, alone or with other funders, to scope and shape the design and commissioning of a potential new cohort study?
8. Given the changing context within which we are operating what approaches, broadly, might we take to funding that would best deliver strategically on our future portfolio and ensure sustainability, working with other funders?

The review will use and assess evidence from existing sources, including the 2014 MRC cohort review (<http://www.mrc.ac.uk/publications/browse/maximising-the-value-of-uk-population-cohorts/> (PDF)), case studies of impacts, and from specially designed workstreams, commissioned externally or undertaken in the ESRC office, including the community consultation and a workshop focussing on needs and how they can be met. Each workstream will produce a report that can be shared publicly, as well as informing the overall review report.

Report composition, format and quality criteria

The review report will provide a concise executive summary and the Panel's recommendations, and will set out the background to the review, its objectives including the key questions addressed and the review methodology. It will present a thorough evaluation of the evidence the Panel considered along with its insights, options analysis and the recommendations arising in context. The report will be concise and written in a publicly accessible way suitable for publishing; it will use annexes for more detailed evidence as necessary.

Quality review

The draft report will be reviewed by the review Steering Group and ESRC review team leads against this specification and other guidance provided to the Panel. The final report will be signed off by the Steering Group Chair.