

The ESRC Festival of Social Science: Learning and success

Executive Summary

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The ESRC's Festival of Social Science showcases the diversity and relevance of social science research, enabling over 500 researchers – primarily ESRC-funded – to communicate with new audiences. These include business, charities, government, teenagers, pensioners and parents. Today the Festival encompasses diverse events throughout the UK, many with a highly regional focus, and the number has grown steadily, from approximately 80 events in 2006 to over 120 in 2010.

This report documents the successes of the Festival and the lessons learned from the perspective of both those organising events over recent years (up to and including the 2010 Festival), as well as those who have attended events. This investigational piece of work aims to assist the ESRC to better understand how the Festival can support researchers, and to consider how successes evident over time can more readily be captured within the evaluation framework in future. This report considers a number of key areas related to the Festival of Social Science:

- The experiences, perceptions and outcomes of the Festival from the perspective of attendees
- The experiences, perceptions and outcomes of the Festival from the perspective of organisers
- The learning and successes of the Festival from the perspective of ESRC Festival staff.

Recommendations for future Festivals, including training, support and evaluation have also been provided.

The report documents work carried out between April 2011 to May 2012 and includes data collated via:

- a) A review of Festival annual evaluation reports 2006-2010 and access to ESRC data on media coverage of the Festival 2006-2010
- b) A questionnaire survey of 35 attendees (2008-2010)
- c) A questionnaire survey of 48 organisers, and further semi-structured interviews with 14 organisers (2008-2010)
- d) Interviews with three members of ESRC Festival staff.

The report suggests a number of notable successes for the Festival of Social Science. The Festival has reached over 43,000 attendees in five years, many of whom were new to the ESRC and had a low or limited awareness of social science prior to attendance. The audience feedback showed very high levels of satisfaction and intention to attend future Festivals. Attendees followed up events at the Festival with actions, including passing on

information, finding out more about topics covered and using information personally. Attendees appreciated the social function of events and, in addition, the events increased their knowledge generally and their awareness of the ESRC. Overall, Festival events targeted a very diverse range of attendees and are becoming more innovative.

The Festival of Social Science and the ESRC provided essential credibility, motivation, and funding opportunities for organisers to reach audiences outside of the academic arena and to develop innovative events. The motivations involved in developing events were both disciplinary and personal. The Festival brand also enabled researchers to obtain buy-in from colleagues who might not normally support communications and engagement activities. Retrospectively event organisers were able to report on a wide variety of benefits from involvement including development of further research and a range of new (and re-established) partnerships, both internal and external. The focus on the social sciences was seen as a unique opportunity for engagement in this area.

Beyond these noted successes there are also aspects for further development, and the report lists six learning points:

Learning point 1: Maintain success whilst expanding the Festival

The Festival of Social Science is seen as prestigious, credible and well-respected by all types of participants. ESRC staff provide a considerable amount of responsive support to both organisers and applicants to the Festival, which is implicit to the success of many events. Maintaining this, as the Festival expands within the current disciplinary and financial environments, will be important for the future of the Festival. At a minimum the Festival will require continued staffing and financial support at the levels it currently receives. For expansion and capitalisation on some of the aspects referred to below, an expanded staff base would be required.

Learning point 2: Communicate the broader benefits for researchers

Organisers' personal, organisational and disciplinary motivations and impacts were extensive, and there are currently mixed uses of the Festival events. Some organisers saw events in isolation to other work they or their organisations were likely to be involved in; others used the continuity of the Festival to build up the impact of their events over time.

The ESRC should communicate more widely the variety of potential benefits for organisers, to encourage continued engagement with the Festival. There are various options to do this - for instance by disseminating the positive outcomes of the Festival to the broader social science, science communication and public engagement communities, and insuring such outcomes feature in communication to researchers by RCUK, National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) and Catalysts.

Learning point 3: Capture learning and benefits

Evaluation of the Festival of Social Science already provides a useful indication of the benefits of Festival events; however a retrospective opportunity to explore ramifications is helpful to capture longer-term matters. ESRC should seek to reach attendees and organisers at a later date - perhaps through targeting attendees and organisers for follow-up six months to a year after their engagement, as this may increase response rates and further add to evidence on these issues.

Learning point 4: Share learning amongst organisers

There is a growing community of organisers who have built considerable expertise in this area. This should be capitalised on by the ESRC and higher education institutions via capacity-building events, mentoring, activities or materials to share this understanding more broadly and efficiently with other social scientists.

Learning point 5: Build a broader perspective of the Festival

This report is limited in size, scope and response rate. Further qualitative work would be beneficial, exploring the outcomes of the Festival of Social Science on its attendees in more detail, as well as more extensive quantitative data collection. The organiser questionnaire and interviews targeted those that have previously been involved in the Festival of Social Science. Future work should examine the perception of the Festival amongst the wider academic community and non-participants to avoid any potential biases.

It would be useful to build a broader picture of the role of Festivals in academic engagement activities across the disciplines, by linking evaluation to other national Festivals and events. There is also capacity for increased research on communication and engagement amongst the social science disciplines, when contrasted to the extensive research which has already been carried out in science and engineering fields.

Learning point 6: Celebrate the Festival

The ESRC should celebrate and highlight the many benefits and successes of the Festival. The Festival has expanded and developed over the years. Its format allows it to be responsive to contemporary issues facing social scientists, without adding to the costs of organising it. It has evolved as a sustainable and continuing opportunity for social scientists to engage with other or new audiences. Attendees enjoy activities, are encouraged to consider social science issues and are keen to attend similar events again. Organisers are able to lever a variety of outcomes from the relatively small amount of money granted by the ESRC for events, in addition it provides a supportive environment in which to develop engagement skills.

There is very positive support for the continuation of the Festival of Social Science amongst attendees, organisers and ESRC staff involved in the Festival, which in addition to the broader evidence provided here suggests it is a good investment for the ESRC to maintain. The foundations of learning, understanding and support which it has now provided for engagement with social science issues offer opportunities for further expansion, increased media coverage of events and the ESRC, and the potential for more activities to be funded externally (for instance by higher education institutions) but to be branded as part of the Festival.