

# **Fit for the Future: Research Leadership in the Social Sciences**

**Consultation document**

June 2019

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## I. Overview

The research funding landscape and the expectations placed on researchers are changing, reflected in a clear shift toward funding more large collaborative and challenge-orientated projects that reach across traditional disciplinary and professional boundaries and are often international in scope. As the Nurse Review of November 2015 emphasised, the most effective research systems facilitate the flow of 'ideas, skills and people in all directions between the different sectors, research disciplines, and various parts of the research endeavour'. As a result, calls for more interdisciplinary research now exist alongside a related emphasis on the benefits of inter-sectoral collaboration, in which multiple sources of expertise are recognised and academics are encouraged to work with non-academic knowledge holders to co-design, co-produce, and co-implement new knowledge, new priorities and mutual learning processes.

This creates a specific leadership challenge for the social sciences: designing, leading and delivering, and simply working within large, complex 'team-science' projects demand skills that have often not been required or incentivised within the social sciences. These include skills in relation to steering multiple research groups, talent management, promoting cultural understanding, navigating the challenges of co-production, managing expectations, balancing flexibility with a clear vision, managing risk, financial planning and intellectual entrepreneurship, and pursuing unexpected opportunities.

This leadership challenge, as highlighted in the [ESRC Delivery Plan 2019](#), has implications for how the social sciences think about researcher development more generally; how it nurtures and sustains intellectual curiosity and creativity throughout the full professional journey, how it cultivates and rewards ambassadors for the social sciences and how it might combine a fresh approach to talent management and building research leadership capacity with UKRI commitments in relation to inclusion, diversity and equality.

In June 2018 Professor Matthew Flinders (University of Sheffield and ESRC Council Member) was appointed as an ESRC Leadership Fellow to undertake a review of existing provision to support researchers' professional development in the social sciences and help develop our approach to building leadership capability in the social sciences. This consultation document summarises the evidence and sets out recommendations building upon the findings of the review. The ESRC wants to work collaboratively to respond to this review and seeks input from individual researchers at all career stages, staff working in ROs to develop research capability, senior university leadership teams together with other organisations interested in building leadership capacity to inform the next stages in development.

## 2. Evidence

This section provides a brief summary of the existing evidence-base on how researcher development and research leadership capacity is currently supported, and how other disciplines beyond the social sciences (and other professions beyond higher education) are attempting to respond to the challenge.

The evidence for this review is based on a ten-month study that took place between July and April 2019. The study included reviews of academic literature and related 'grey' literature; insights and evidence underpinning the creation of new leadership development structures across the UK public sector; research and recommendations published by the Public Services Leadership Taskforce in October 2018; meetings and discussions with researchers, funders, professional research support staff and representatives of a range of research-user communities; discussions with key stakeholder focus groups; and landscape reviews of how the ESRC and other research councils currently seek to promote, support and sustain research leadership capacity.

The findings are summarised as responses to six inter-related questions (see below), and a full version of the evidence review is available [here](#).

### **RQ1. What is the current evidence base and academic knowledge about researcher development and research leadership?**

1. The existing evidence base provides very little information about the specific topic of researcher development and leadership.
2. Most research is focused on 'managerial' and 'organisation' leadership (i.e. an institutional focus) rather than upon *research* leadership.
3. The paucity of research on research leadership may reflect the existence of a professional culture within academe (particularly strong within the social sciences) that emphasises scholarly independence and autonomy.
4. However, recent academic research shows increased interest in the concept of 'collaborative leadership' in higher education.

### **RQ2. What is researcher development and research leadership, and what evidence is there that they are emerging as a key issue?**

1. Researcher development and leadership seeks to provide the skills, competencies and support structures that researchers need to excel. In addition to more traditional academic skills, the evidence also suggests that there is a need for social scientists who are able to work effectively with research users, and have experience working in non-academic research-relevant environments.
2. It is difficult for social scientists to gain experience of planning or running large multi-disciplinary projects.
3. The International Social Science Council's focus on a multi-layered approach to building researcher development and nurturing talent - with its emphasis on *individual*, *organisational* and *systemic* levels of change - may offer valuable insights.
4. A focus on researcher development and research leadership have formed a core component of UKRI's initial agenda and work plan (as seen in the launch of the UKRI Future Leaders Fellowships).

### **RQ3. What does the current capacity framework look like and where are the gaps in provision?**

1. The existing capacity-building structures are underdeveloped, fragmented and tend to focus predominantly on early career researchers. As a result, the most common elements associated with a successful research career tend to be luck and having a supportive mentor.
2. Research leaders in the social sciences generally receive very little or no formal training or support in managing major research projects, and are generally expected to 'learn on the job' through trial-and-error.
3. Historically the Research Councils have considered talent management and development of research leadership capabilities as the domain of research organisations in their role as employers.
4. The evidence suggests that if a gap exists in the current research infrastructure, it relates to mid-career and senior staff. The evidence calls attention to the need to focus on the full professional journey and critical transition points, rather than on any one specific career stage.

**RQ4. What does the evidence suggest are the main obstacles or challenges to promoting researcher development and research leadership?**

1. Academics are facing increased professional pressures, and in this context investing time and energy in professional development is often seen as a luxury that cannot be afforded. This belief is evident especially amongst early career researchers who often are employed in a succession of temporary contracts, and as a result securing their next academic post normally takes priority over the development of their researcher skills.
2. Leading large and complex research grant applications is risky – it takes a lot of time and energy, but success is far from guaranteed. The evidence also suggests that the reward and recognition frameworks in the social sciences create few incentives for taking on these roles or being involved in ‘team science’ projects.
3. The institutional architecture of higher education remains predominantly disciplinary-based (e.g. journals, departments, learned societies, REF, etc.) which makes interdisciplinary work challenging to undertake and difficult to publish.
4. Despite a growing emphasis on fluidity and ‘open knowledge processes’, inter-sectoral mobility<sup>1</sup> is challenging in the social sciences. It is very difficult for ‘lost leaders’ to re-enter academe regardless of their skills and expertise, and few incentives exist for academics to undertake secondments beyond academe.

**RQ5. Is there evidence of disciplines beyond the social sciences innovating in this space?**

1. The Clore Leadership Foundation was established in 2002 to respond to a recognised leadership challenge in the cultural sector. Targeted at mid-career professionals and with an explicit focus on facilitating the mobility of people and ideas, it has evolved into a successful and internationally respected development framework. The programme maintains a strong cadre effect and has developed a long-term alumni network.
2. The Crucible initiative was originally developed by NESTA in 2005 to build capacity at the intersection between disciplines and professions. It was later developed into the Scottish Crucible (2008) and Welsh Crucible (2011) to build innovative research leadership capacity amongst mid-career academics and researchers from a wide range of public and private backgrounds. It has been deemed as simple, effective and relatively low-cost.
3. In 2012 the Wellcome Trust launched a new research leadership programme for senior scholars who already had some leadership experience, and were viewed as having the potential to lead at the highest level and become ambassadors for the biomedical sciences. It offers a clear leadership competency model and is based on a ‘learning journey’ approach that builds formal and informal connections across sectors.
4. The Academy of Medical Sciences has launched an ambitious new talent management strategy that unites sectors and disciplines. At the core of this strategy is a new programme – Future Leaders in Innovation, Entrepreneurship and Research [FLIER] – which could offer valuable insights for the social sciences.

**RQ6. How are other parts of the public sector addressing similar challenges?**

1. The evidence reveals a growth of leadership-related development platforms (i.e. ‘academies’) across the public sector that could provide valuable conduits through which researchers and research users could forge relationships, develop skills, and facilitate mobility. These include the new national Leadership Centre which seeks to support England’s public-sector leaders to deliver world-leading public services.
2. Many of the challenges that these leadership academies are intended to address mirror those faced by academics within higher education (i.e. the need to work across traditional professional or institutional boundaries).
3. Most of the initiatives revolve around increasing capacity through sharing best practice, creating new opportunities, thinking creatively, expanding the notion of the professional community, building new boundary-spanning structures, and incentivising change.

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<sup>1</sup> Movement between academia and other sectors

### 3. Proposition

This section sets out a proposal for addressing the researcher and leadership challenges outlined above. In order to create a pipeline of talented research leaders that can place the social sciences at the centre of major new investments to address societal challenges, the ESRC believes that a national framework for research leadership development in the social sciences is needed. This framework would highlight the importance of researcher and leadership development as an integral part of research investments made by funders. We would seek to develop the detail of the framework collaboratively with the social science community, but the four core features that are derived from the evidence are summarised below.

#### 1. A fresh focus on the entire pipeline and key transition points

The first feature central to a national framework highlights **the importance of researcher and leadership development at all career stages**. Beginning with a focus on *pre-docs* before thinking about doctoral students, post-docs, early career researchers, mid-career and then senior research leaders allows for the specific needs of individual career stages to be addressed within a coherent, overall structure. This ‘whole pipeline’ approach also enables progression to be more transparent and allows researchers to prepare to ‘step up’ or understand what is required to move into more senior research leadership roles. A focus on key transition points in that pipeline will ensure that appropriate professional development solutions and high-quality mentorship are not issues of luck. Incentivising and rewarding behaviour that focuses upon nurturing future generations is vital, as is recognition of the increasingly fluid interplay of roles and responsibilities within research teams. Mobility via cross-institutional and cross-sectoral collaborations will be central.

#### 2. The creation of a new hub as a catalyst for driving change

The second feature central to a national framework is **the need to catalyse, drive and sustain change**. The evidence review revealed how investments in relation to researcher development and leadership are often short-term and vulnerable to termination in the face of financial pressures or the emergence of new institutional concerns. The social sciences lack a ‘centre of excellence’ in relation to such matters, and the creation of a new ‘hub’ for researcher development and leadership would provide a high-level opportunity to address a range of goals. This hub will need to be a collaboration between ESRC, research organisations and other stakeholders and would aim to:

- develop a national approach
- drive performance and signal change
- promote a dynamic and inclusive culture
- establish a national network of research leaders
- support mobility between sectors and develop researchers’ skills to work collaboratively with users
- commission research and adopt an evidence-based approach
- seek to demonstrate the effectiveness of collaborative research leadership.

#### 3. Promote the development of leadership capability through support and incentives

The third feature central to a national framework is **the promotion of leadership development**. We want to see funders emphasising the importance of researcher and leadership development at all stages in their funding, as well as supporting individuals in being able to prioritise it alongside other competing demands. Equally, we wish to challenge ROs to respond to the evidence which shows that existing leadership provision is rarely exposing academics to the complex demands they will face, with few opportunities to interact and learn from experienced research leaders. There is also little emphasis on driving innovative ways of working across different disciplinary or organisational contexts, and the evidence suggests that a large number of researchers feel under-supported, with senior researchers often feeling exposed and daunted by their new responsibilities. Identifying ways to support and incentivise these behaviours is something we would like to explore with the community. Professional networks where researchers can support each other, spread best practice and learn from the

experience of others are generally not in place-something which both ROs and funders can address. For example, we've identified an opportunity for ESRC post-docs (i.e. 'Future Leaders', now 'New Investigators') to be integrated into a formalised talent management strategy, come together as a national cohort and build a powerful long-term 'cadre effect' to offer mutual support. At the other end of the professional journey, senior scholars leading major investments or directing research centres or institutes could be organised into a 'Senior Leadership College' to spread best practice, forge peer-to-peer support structures, facilitate inter-sectoral mobility and ensure a ready supply of contributors to development provision across the UK. If the next generation of social scientists are likely to need a broader range of skills in relation to interdisciplinary awareness or a sophisticated understanding of non-academic environments, there may be a need to consider the length and flexibility offered in the current funding opportunities.

#### **4. The need to achieve cultural change across the sector**

The fourth feature central to a national framework for researcher and leadership development is **the significance of academic cultures**. The evidence review suggests that embedded cultures often become a major impediment to new initiatives, and highlights the importance of deliberately planning cultural change from the outset. This framework would want to see the social science community working collaboratively to address some of the deep-seated cultural challenges identified, for example reward and promotion structures in the social sciences generally only recognise scientific publications where the applicant is the sole or lead author, and research grants where they are the Principal Investigator and not a co-investigator.

## 4. Engage

The ESRC would like to work collaboratively to address the challenges outlined above. Input is welcome from individual researchers at all career stages, staff working in ROs to develop research capability, senior university leadership teams together with other organisations interested in building leadership capacity. In this context, respondents are invited to frame their responses to this consultation around the following questions:

1. Do the challenges presented above around researcher and leadership development fit with your understanding or not? If not please explain why.
  - a. Is there further evidence that should be considered?
  - b. Are there alternative interpretations in need of review?
2. Would the creation of a national framework for researcher and leadership development be useful or not?
  - a. Are there alternative solutions you would favour over this suggested approach?
  - b. Are there gaps or opportunities missed with this proposition?
3. What is the priority for immediate action?
  - a. Are early career researchers the key target audience or is there a more pressing need at other career stages?
4. Which bodies should be responsible for taking the development of research leadership forward?
  - a. Who would you want to see involved/represented in any new governance arrangements?

**We welcome your input into this national consultation – please send responses to: [m.flinders@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:m.flinders@sheffield.ac.uk) by 16 August 2019.**

**A consultation period will take place from June to mid-August 2019 in which a number of institutional engagement visits will take place. Further details about these events can be found on our website.**

**A final project report and set of recommendations will be published in Autumn 2019.**