



**EVALUATION OF THE
ESRC SMALL GRANTS SCHEME**

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IN CONFIDENCE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In March 2006, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) commissioned the Centre for Research and Evaluation at Sheffield Hallam University to evaluate ESRC's Small Grants Scheme.

Aims

The evaluation aimed at examining the operation, profile, impact and development of the Scheme.

Review process

The evaluation was undertaken between April and September 2006 and utilised a variety of research methods:

1. Analysis of available documentation to give an initial overview of the purpose, intended operation and profile of the Scheme.
2. Database analysis of applicants and award-holders, and comparisons with the Standard and First Grants Schemes.
3. Survey of award-holders completing their project in 2000, 2001, 2004 and 2005; 334 responses (response rate: 62%).
4. Internet-based study of a subset of 29 award-holders.
5. Semi-structured interviews with four past and six present Research Grants Board members.
6. E-mail discussion with members of the Virtual College; 53 responses from 38 out of 107 members (response rate: 36%).
7. E-mail consultation with learned societies contacted via the Academy of Learned Societies for the Social Sciences; two responses.
8. E-mail survey of research managers and support officers contacted via Association for Research Managers and Administrators UK list; eleven responses.
9. Review of similar schemes offered by other funding organisations.

Key findings

The evaluation shows that the Small Grants Scheme receives strong support amongst various groups and that it functions well overall. No other funding organisation offers any comparable funding opportunity for social scientists.

In 2004/2005, 36 percent of all submitted applications were funded, which can be compared to a success rate of 19 percent for the Standard Grants Scheme. This difference in success rates between the two schemes might be an issue for the Board to reflect further upon.

There was consensus amongst Board members, College members and research managers/support officers that the Scheme should be open and responsive, aimed at low-cost projects and have quick turnarounds. However, there was confusion regarding whether the Scheme was particularly aimed at junior academics.

There was also disagreement between the Board, College and external stakeholders about the extent to which the Scheme should take risks in funding-decisions. Putting this in perspective, 14 percent of surveyed award-holders classified their project as 'pilot work, testing an idea, methodological development, etc'. Over the years, 90 percent of the projects were graded as good or outstanding at the end of award. In addition, 76 percent of the award-holders had further developed the research topic(s) studied in the project after completing their project.

The Small Grants Scheme attracts a larger proportion of applications from junior academics than the Standard Grants Scheme, and 40 percent of the award-holders had not previously applied for ESRC funding. Nevertheless, most award-holders had long experience of research (they had either held an ESRC grant previously or worked on an ESRC project prior to their application without being a grant-holder) and over the years, there was a tendency for awarding a greater proportion of Small Grants to applicants with research experience (that is, applicants who previously worked on an ESRC project). In addition, many successful applicants were based at departments/schools that had received ESRC grants within the last five years and worked in pre-1992 universities. At the same time, the evaluation shows that junior academics do not achieve less in terms of research outputs and that Small Grants have more impact on their career than on the career of senior academics.

Some disciplines (in particular, psychology, economy and sociology) were more successful in obtaining funding from the Scheme than others. This pattern was replicated in the Standard and First Grants Schemes. There was a consensus across different groups that the Scheme should continue to judge applications on

merit and not introduce a quota for different disciplines. Instead, it was suggested that, if ESRC wants to stimulate research within a particular discipline, it should develop a research programme accordingly.

The Scheme operates well overall. In general, award-holders were satisfied with the application form and guidelines, with support from ESRC staff during the application process, and with the management/administration of their grant. Still, remarks were made about the application process, for example, the form was seen as repetitive and time-consuming, and additional suggestions were made to ensure a high quality assessment process. Also, the system of end-of-award grading met with criticism. It was not seen as appropriate, considering the length of Small Grants projects, and it was seen as a blunt instrument that does not measure the qualitative aspects of success within a research project.

In general, Small Grants award-holders were successful in producing publications and presentations, and many of the projects had been covered in media reports, and used by policy-makers and practitioners. In addition, the Scheme had an impact on award-holders' careers, especially when it was their first ESRC grant, and on the research community. Official ESRC statistics suggest that there were not as many outputs from Small Grants as from Standard Grants. However, the official ESRC statistics include fewer outputs per project than the survey, which may be due to a potential skew in the survey sample or that the ESRC database is not up-to-date.

Conclusions and recommendations

All in all, we find the Small Grants Scheme successful, and we find that it has a positive impact on both the social science research community and the careers of individual academics. The success of the Scheme is reflected in that it has strong support across different groups within the research community. To ensure future success, we believe that it is crucial to make continuous improvements as response both to the changing landscape of research funding and to matters identified by this evaluation and discussed below.

The Scheme is open and responsive, aimed at low-cost projects and has quick turnarounds. This seems to be functioning well and we see no reason for this to be reconsidered. Nevertheless, this evaluation reveals a confusion regarding the purpose of the Scheme in terms of both whom it is aimed at and the level of risk-taking. As these matters are of great importance for a grant scheme, we think

that clarifications are necessary. Otherwise, the Scheme may suffer from not receiving applications from people who think that they or their project are not eligible for it.

Recommendation 1:

Given the confusion regarding the target group of the Scheme and in the light of the recently introduced First Grants Scheme, we recommend that the Board clarify the purpose of the Scheme and its target groups. This decision should take other views reflected in this evaluation into account. Thereafter, clear instructions should be communicated with the Virtual College and information posted on the ESRC website. In relation to the introduction of the First Grants Scheme, it would seem that there is no need to promote the Small Grants Scheme exclusively as a vehicle for less experienced researchers.

Our impression is that the Scheme currently accommodates only a low level of risk-taking in funding decisions. Risk-taking refers to both seniority and experience of the applicants and to characteristics of the proposed project. It should be noted that current consideration of prior track record in the review process means that junior academics are disadvantaged, even though junior Small Grants award-holders produce as many research outputs as senior award-holders.

Recommendation 2:

We recommend a Board discussion on, and clarification of, the policy on risk-taking within the Small Grants Scheme, and that this discussion either directly involve the Virtual College or that the outcome is communicated to the College. Although it is essential for the Scheme to encompass self-contained projects, we think that there is an opportunity for the Small Grants Scheme to also embrace a wider range and type of projects from a wider set of applicants. It appears that there is a *de facto* tendency for 'track record' to outweigh other factors in assessing applications and that 'risk-taking' might be extended to:

- a) supporting high quality applications even if the applicants do not have a good track record in research;
- b) supporting projects with non-standard or non-traditional methodological elements;

- c) be a vehicle to test out ideas prior to application for a Standard Grant. In relation to this, we think that ESRC could be more proactive in encouraging people who have successfully completed a Small Grants project to submit larger research applications.

Furthermore, we also believe that the issue of varying success rates amongst different groups of academics needs to be addressed. There were variations by seniority, institutional type and disciplinary background. Since many successful applicants and/or their colleagues have experience of ESRC funding, there may be lack of support for, and experience of, research council funding within certain institutions. However, we think that only high-quality applications should be supported and do not recommend an introduction of quotas for certain groups of academics.

Recommendation 3:

We recommend that ESRC support less successful groups by providing them with more information about funding opportunities and the application process. This can be done, for example, in seminars and workshops, and via more communication and collaboration with research managers.

The evaluation shows that the Scheme operates well overall, but that there is room for improvement. Some respondents thought that the application process was time-consuming and the assessment process non-transparent. This could have implications in preventing people from submitting applications.

Recommendation 4:

We recommend the following improvements to the application form:

- a) make the form simpler with less repetition of information given in the proposal;
- b) enable the form to be saved in other formats, for example, as a text file or in Excel;
- c) make the Je-S help larger on the screen and categorise it by research council type;
- d) make it easier to see all resources information in one place on the form;
- e) provide a sample form;
- f) give clearer information on who to contact for support.

The assessment process is crucial for the success of the Small Grants Scheme. Improvements can be made to ensure the quality of the assessment process

Recommendation 5:

We recommended that ESRC:

- a) ensure that applications are sent to College assessors with expertise in the area or, if there is no assessor with relevant expertise, ask a College member to nominate an external assessor;
- b) provide training for College members as most of them are not likely to assess more than a few applications per year;
- c) ensure that funding decisions are always fed back to College assessors;
- d) develop a checklist of standard problems with applications to avoid assessors writing long comments on poor applications, giving them more time to write supportive comments on promising applications;
- e) clarify instructions regarding assessment comments, that is, whether comments are required and what they should cover;
- f) review the process of reconsideration of applications when there are disagreements between the assessors, so that both Board assessor and College assessor are involved in reassessing the application, even though this might mean a longer turnaround time.

Currently, money cannot be spent beyond the award end date. In particular, this has implications for dissemination activities.

Recommendation 6:

We recommend that ESRC looks into changing this matter or clarify the information on this in its application guidelines.

We think that end-of-award grading is simplistic in that it does not reflect the multifaceted characteristic of research outcome and impact. The grading is further complicated by the fact that there is a delay in getting research outputs published, which is particularly problematic in the evaluation of short projects.

Recommendation 7:

We recommend that ESRC undertakes a review of the purpose and system of end-of-award grading. Projects should be evaluated against their aims and targets and, considering the length and size of projects funded within

the Small Grants Scheme, we suggest that less emphasis should be placed on research outputs.

Finally, the evaluation identified confusion or lack of clarity in several areas, such as target group of the Scheme and the assessment process, suggesting that there might be a need for better communication about the purpose and operation of the Scheme. Unclear information and lack of transparency in how the Small Grants Scheme is run have implications for both its outreach and credibility.

Recommendation 8:

Consequently, we recommend that ESRC take actions to improve communication about the Scheme between the Board and the Virtual College, and between ESRC and the research community. This could be inspired by processes applied by other research councils, such as the EPSRC, which runs programmes of visits to universities and liaison with local research managers.

INTRODUCTION

In March 2006, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) commissioned the Centre for Research and Evaluation at Sheffield Hallam University to evaluate ESRC's Small Grants Scheme.

Aims

The evaluation aimed at examining:

1. The operation of the Small Grants Scheme;
2. The profile of the Scheme;
3. The impact of the Scheme;
4. The development of the Scheme.

Summary of review process

The evaluation was undertaken between April and September 2006 and utilised a variety of research methods and approaches, summarised below.

1. Analysis of available documentation

Available documents on the Small Grants Scheme were consulted to give an initial overview of the purpose and intended operation of the Scheme and its profile. Documents included meeting notes and annual reports from the Research Grants Board, a review of the Virtual College System and information presented on the ESRC website. All documents referred to in the evaluation are further specified in the results section of the report.

2. Database analysis of Small Grants Scheme applicants and award-holders, and comparisons with the Standard and First Grants Schemes

Existing databases were analysed in a number of ways. First, they were analysed to ascertain which applications have been successful. Second, award-holders were compared longitudinally. Third, applicants to, and award-holders of, the Small, Standard and First Grants Schemes were analysed and compared to see whether similar or distinct groups apply to the schemes and whether there are similar or separate groups achieving success. The database of applicants covered the period of 1988–2006, while the database of award-holders covered 1987–2006. Comparisons between schemes covered 1987–2006 with the exception of the First Grants Scheme, which started in 2006. Criteria examined included:

academic title, age, disciplinary background, university affiliation, value and length of award, and end-of-award grade.

3. Survey of award-holders

A questionnaire was distributed to all award-holders, who had completed their Small Grants project in 2000, 2001, 2004 and 2005. This included a total of 562 award-holders, although 27 of these were not contactable via their recorded addresses. The award-holders were given the option of responding electronically or by mail. There were two e-mail reminders and one postal reminder. In total, 334 award-holders responded to the questionnaire (response rate: 62%). In brief, the questionnaire included items on the operation of the Scheme, output from the projects, and whether the projects had an impact on the research career of the award-holders.

4. Internet-based study of a subset of award-holders

For 29 award-holders, findings from the questionnaire were triangulated with an Internet search of Google, Google Scholar and Web of Science. This search was aimed at checking reliability of survey findings and explored research outputs of the grant and impact on career.

5. Interviews with past and present Research Grants Board members

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four past and six present Research Grants Board members. Of these interviews, three were made face-to-face and seven via telephone. The topic guide covered: the purpose of the Small Grants Scheme, differences between the Small Grants Scheme and other ESRC schemes, quality of applications, profile of applicants, process of appraising applications, risk-taking in decisions to award grants, differences between Board Assessors and Virtual College Assessors, evaluation outcomes, impact of the Scheme, and potential improvements of the Scheme.

6. E-mail discussion with the Virtual College

Members of ESRC's Virtual College were consulted via an e-mail discussion. The discussion ran over three weeks with one set of questions per week. The discussion covered the following topics: the purpose of the Scheme, what sorts of projects/applicants should be supported, various aspects of the process of assessing applications, impact of the Scheme, differences between the Small Grants Scheme and other ESRC schemes, risk-taking in decisions to award

grants, and varying success rates of different disciplines. A total of 53 responses were received from 38 out of 107 Virtual College members (response rate: 36%).

7. E-mail consultation with learned societies

The evaluation was supported by e-mail consultation with learned societies. A set of questions was distributed to 31 learned societies via the Academy of Learned Societies for the Social Sciences. Two learned societies responded to this consultation. They were asked about their opinion on the purpose of the Scheme, what kinds of projects/applicants should be supported, the application and appraisal processes, impact of the Scheme, and potential improvements.

8. E-mail survey of research managers and support officers

Research support officers were surveyed via the JISCmail Association for Research Managers and Administrators UK (ARMA) list. List members were asked to contribute with responses to a number of questions relating to awareness and promotion of the Scheme in their institutions, the purpose of the Scheme, application and appraisal processes, the impact of the Scheme and potential improvements. There were eleven usable responses to this e-mail survey.

9. Review of similar schemes offered by other funding organisations

An Internet-based study was undertaken exploring comparable schemes offered by other funding organisations. All grants schemes of research councils¹ in the UK were consulted along with those of other large independent funding bodies, that is, publicly funded bodies² and charities³.

Structure of report

Findings from the evaluation are presented in this report starting with a section on the purpose of the Small Grants Scheme. This is followed by sections on the operation of the Scheme including application and appraisal processes; the profile of the Scheme addressing who and what kind of projects receive, or should receive, funding; and performance and impact of the Scheme. Thereafter, a review of similar schemes offered by other funding organisations is presented. Development and scope for improvements of the Scheme is discussed in each section and summarised in the final section of the report. This section includes conclusions of the findings and recommendations on how the Scheme can be improved.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Purpose of the Small Grants Scheme

Documentary analysis

On ESRC's website⁴, it is stated that the both the Small Grants Scheme and the Standard Grants Scheme are flexible and responsive, and that the difference between them is the amount of funding, that is, more or less than £100,000. It is also stated that the Small Grants Scheme is 'streamlined' with decisions usually made within 14 weeks compared to 22 weeks for the Standard Grants Scheme. On the website, it is furthermore stated that the Small Grants Scheme is particularly useful for new researchers making their first application to the ESRC.

Past and present Grants Board members' perspective

Past and present members of the Research Grants Board reported that they did not generally have policy discussions about the purpose of the Small Grants Scheme and that there is no 'clear intellectual determination'. However, there is a 'tacit agreement' about who and what the Small Grants Scheme is for. It is believed that the Scheme is for junior and less experienced researchers, as a way to 'break their teeth' and that it gives them the opportunity to not constantly 'clutch at the coat tails of more senior colleagues'. The Small Grants Scheme is also useful for speculative ideas that may grow into something larger; riskier ideas or projects that are, quite literally, small in scope and that, therefore, do not require a large sum of funding. In addition, the Scheme is frequently used by senior academics as an 'easier' way to get money than the Standard Grants Scheme.

However, past and previous Board members found it unclear how the Scheme fits with the new First Grants Scheme and thought that the situation had become confusing. On the one hand, it is possible that this new scheme will replace the Small Grants Scheme as a funding source suitable for junior researchers. On the other hand, many junior researchers need to fund 100% of their posts themselves and, since the First Grants Scheme only funds 40% of salary costs, it is unclear how this is going to impact upon the purpose of the Small Grants Scheme. Overall, the Small Grants Scheme is seen as a successful scheme and 'a good thing' that should not be phased out, although it does need to 'redefine itself' and make clear its position in the larger context of ESRC grants.

Virtual College members' perspective

There was a consensus amongst Virtual College members participating in the e-mail discussion that the Small Grants Scheme is a very good and valuable scheme that leads to high quality projects with good value for money. The purpose of the Scheme was identified as funding low-cost projects that merit funding. Its efficiency with a quick turnaround was also mentioned.

In addition to these general statements, some members pointed out that the Scheme offers an opportunity to test out new ideas and methodologies, and to get developmental work funded. Some members suggested focusing the Scheme on innovation in theory or methods. However, other members objected to this while emphasising the importance of appropriate rather than innovatory methods. Yet other members thought that all ESRC research should be innovative in some sense. It was also argued that Grants Board members were somewhat conservative in their assessments and not prepared to take risks with less orthodox topics or methodologies. This point is further discussed in the section 'Operation of the Scheme' below.

Also, some members argued that the Scheme gives inexperienced researchers a chance to pursue projects, while others were strongly opposed to the idea of excluding senior researchers from this funding opportunity. This point is further discussed in the section 'Profile of the Scheme' below.

Finally, college members pointed out that the Small Grants Scheme can be used as 'seed funding' for a larger submission, which might be considered at a later stage. In relation to this, one Virtual College member thought that ESRC could be more pro-active in encouraging people who have successfully completed a Small Grants project to put forward ideas for larger projects building on their initial Small Grant. In that way, the Small Grants Scheme could reinforce their role as a stepping-stone to more substantial projects.

Research managers and support officers' perspective

There was a general assumption among research managers and support officers that the Small Grants Scheme is a starter scheme for relatively new researchers or those with little track record in research. In relation to this, it should be noted that some respondents did not seem to be aware of the First Grants Scheme. The Small Grants Scheme was also seen as good for seed-corn development projects

and pilot projects. It was perceived to have a quicker turnaround response period, which is beneficial for the applicant.

Summary

On the ESRC website, the Small Grants Scheme is presented as a streamlined, open response scheme offering funding of up to £100,000. In line with this, there was consensus amongst Board members, College members and research managers/support officers that the Scheme should be open and responsive, aimed at low-cost projects and have quick turnarounds.

Still, there was confusion regarding the purpose of the Scheme and whom it is aimed at. Board members along with research managers/support officers claimed that the Scheme is particularly aimed at junior researchers, something that is also stated on ESRC's website. Although this opinion was reflected in responses from some College members, their general opinion was that the Scheme should be open also for senior academics. Amongst College members, there was also a discussion on whether the Scheme should be particularly aimed at innovative projects.

Implications of an unclear purpose of the Small Grants Scheme include a risk that potential applicants do not submit applications as they do not think that their project would fit the Scheme, alternatively receiving applications that are not eligible for the Scheme. We find it surprising that the Grants Board does not have policy discussions on the purpose of the Scheme. A key task for the Board is to clarify the purpose of the Scheme and its target groups, while taking other views reflected in this evaluation into account. Given the recent introduction of the First Grants Scheme, we do not think that there is a need to promote the Small Grants Scheme exclusively as a funding opportunity for less experienced researchers. Furthermore, the Scheme can support innovative pilot projects testing out ideas prior to larger applications and we think that ESRC can play a more active role in encouraging applications to Standard Grants from people that have successfully completed a Small Grants project. Nevertheless, it is essential that the Small Grants Scheme is also open for self-contained projects.

Operation of the Scheme

Documentary analysis

Applications for a Small Grant are assessed by one Research Grants Board assessor and one Virtual College assessor. The Virtual College was set up in 1997, and although there has been criticism regarding its roles and achievements, it has been successful in assessing Small Grants⁵. The applications are given one of the following grades:

- Alpha: for applications that are felt to be of such merit that they are likely to make significant contributions to the subjects. As the Grants Board does not normally have sufficient funds to support all the applications in this category, assessors use five sub-categories of alpha grade (A1–A5) to indicate the relative priority of proposals for funding.
- Beta: for applications that have merit but are unlikely to have a significant influence on the development of the subject.
- Reject: for applications that are flawed in design or are deemed not worth pursuing.⁶

Notes from Board meetings⁷ show that the Board assessors have agreed to rank all A3 grades as High, Medium or Low. In addition, the Board has expressed a wish for College Assessors to provide clear explanations for their assessments⁸ and clearer decisions on whether applications should be funded, since the Chair and Vice-Chairs are often not experts in the field⁹.

The financial limit for Small Grants has been increased over the years: in 2003 to £45,000 and following the implementation of Full Economic Costing (FEC) in 2005 to £100,000. There has also been an increase in the number of grants awarded resulting in an increased spending. Consequently, at several meetings¹⁰, the Grants Board has stated that the number of grants funded has to be reduced to avoid overspend.

In 2004–2005, 453 applications were submitted for funding from the Small Grants Scheme. Of these, 394 (87%) received an Alpha Grade and 162 were recommended for award, which means that the success rate of all submitted applications was 36 percent and that 41 percent of all Alpha graded applications were funded. By comparison, almost as many applications were submitted under the Standard Grants Scheme (428 applications), but the proportion of applications receiving an Alpha Grade was slightly lower (79%). The major

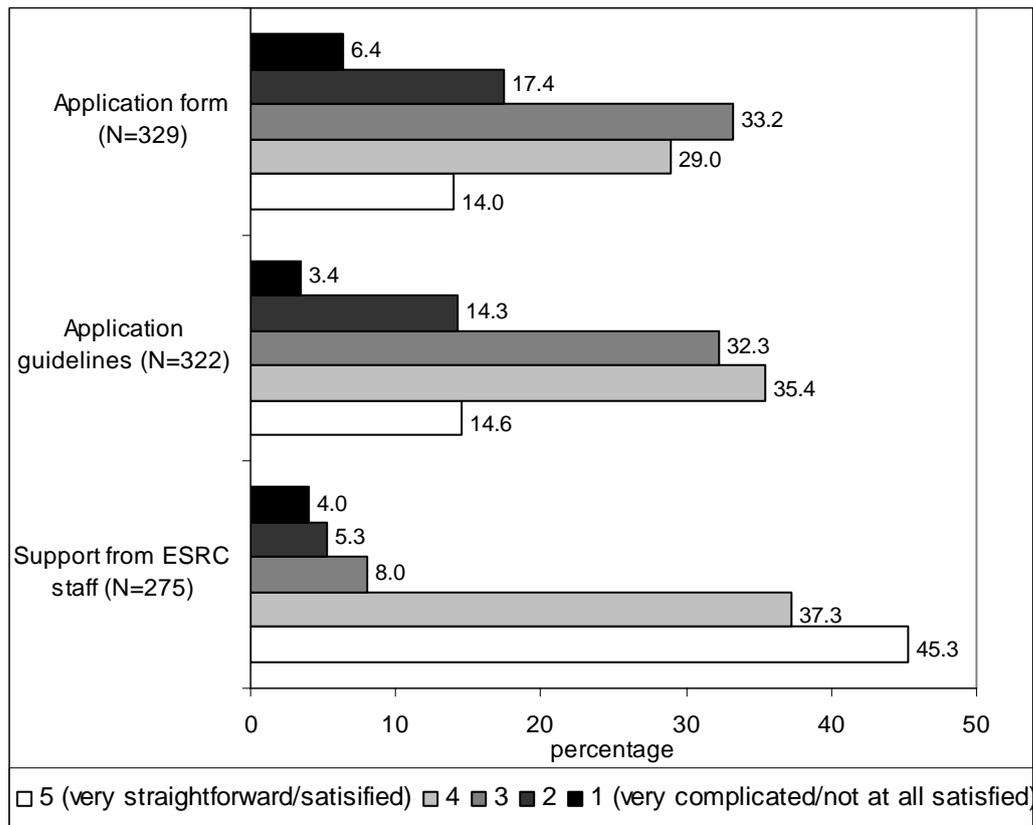
difference between the schemes had to do with funding decisions. Only 19 percent of all Standard Grants Scheme applications (23 percent of the Alpha Graded applications) were funded.¹¹

The Small Grants Scheme is organised to provide a relatively quick turnaround on decisions on whether to fund or reject applications. On ESRC's website, it is stated that decisions are usually made within 14 Weeks.¹² In 2004–2005 decisions were made within 15 weeks for 74 percent of the applications and within 24 weeks for 97 percent of the applications. In 2003–2004, the comparative figures were 92 percent and 100 percent, respectively.¹³ A review from 2002 shows that the turnaround time was slightly better for College Assessors than for Board Assessors, and that there was a consistency in grades awarded by College and Board Assessors¹⁴.

Award-holders' perspective

In general, award-holders had not experienced any major problems with the application form or the guidelines. Even though some of them found them very complicated, it was more common that they found them very straightforward (Figure 1). On a scale from 1 to 5, where 5 stands for 'very straightforward', the average score was 3.3 for the form and 3.4 for the guidelines. Whilst completing their application, 23 percent of the award-holders received support from ESRC staff and most of them were satisfied or very satisfied with this support (Figure 1). On a scale from 1 to 5 where 5 stands for 'very satisfied', the average level of satisfaction was 4.1. There were no significant differences in satisfaction levels with regard to which year award-holders had completed their project¹⁵.

Figure 1. How did you find the application form, guidelines and support from ESRC staff? (total across years)



Comments to these questionnaire items confirm that while some respondents found the form straightforward and user-friendly, other respondents had major objections to it. Some of them thought that the form was complicated and repetitive. Also, respondents found the form time-consuming, especially in relation to the size of the grant and the success rate. Frequently, it was pointed out that there had been several updates of the software, which have made it impossible to retrieve earlier versions of the form. It was suggested that it would be 'better if it could be saved as a text file'.

In general, comments about the guidelines indicate that these were considered long but helpful; as one respondent put it: 'Once you have had time to read everything carefully it is straightforward. The guidelines are extremely helpful'. Respondents with access to previous applications thought that this was helpful, while those that did not have such support were in a worse position. For example, one respondent said:

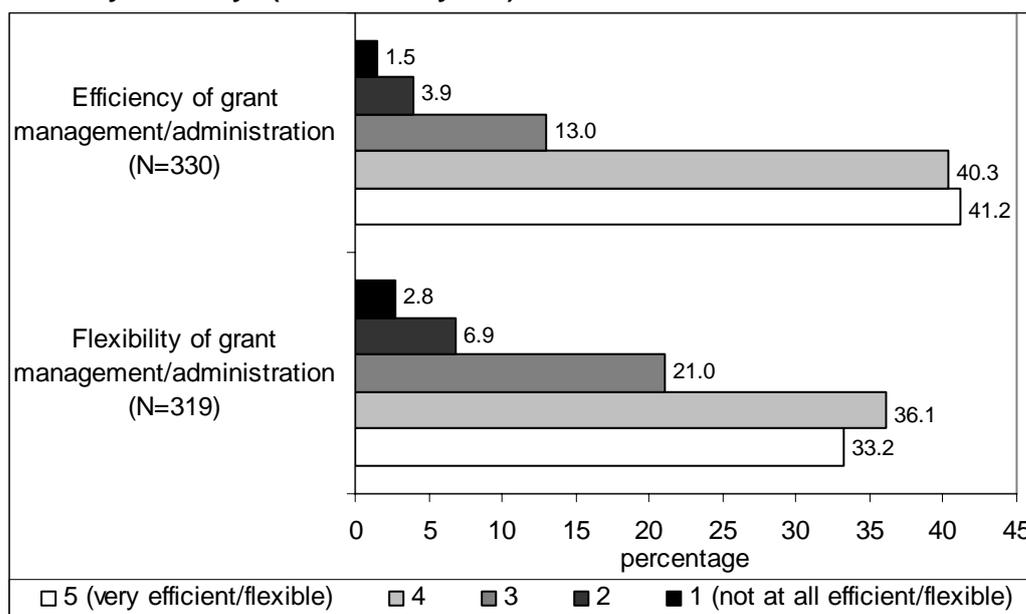
For me, starting out as a young researcher in a post-92-uni', the hardest thing was self-teaching myself the 'craft' of ESRC from completion, which is, after all, a testing political exercise.

One respondent thought that, in addition to guidelines, a 'blueprint or sample form' would be helpful. Besides the form itself, several respondents found it difficult to find things on the website.

In general, comments relating to ESRC officers and computer staff were positive. They were seen as supportive, patient and helpful, although it was not always clear who was meant to support applicants. For instance, one respondent addressed both these points: 'Very good – when you find the right person who is calm, informative and friendly'. There were a few exceptions, though, with respondents that found ESRC staff bureaucratic, overworked and giving responses of poor quality.

Award-holders were also asked how they found ESRC's management and administration of their grant once their application had been accepted. Most of them thought that this was done in an efficient and flexible way (Figure 2). Average scores were 4.2 for efficiency and 3.9 for flexibility (on a scale from 1 to 5, where 5 stands for very efficient/flexible), with a trend of higher scores in recent years¹⁶.

Figure 2: How did you find that ESRC managed/administrated the grant in terms of efficiency/flexibility? (total across years)



Open comments reflected these positive views, and often ESRC were seen as more flexible and efficient than the local university's administration or finance staff. With a few exceptions, respondents who, for various reasons, needed an extended deadline or later start date of the project reported that this was smoothly arranged. In general, respondents changing work place found it easy to transfer the grant to a different university. It was also reported that ESRC had allowed respondents to use the budget in a flexible way. However, several respondents stated that they were not allowed to transfer money beyond the award end date. For example, one respondent said:

Unspent funds for conference presentation on the work of the grant could not be carried over the year. This defeats one of the main purposes of research.

Finally, a couple of respondents pointed out that they found the tone of ESRC responses 'bossy and fussy' and, considering their experience, they expected more trust and credit for their track record.

Past and present Grants Board members' perspective

Generally, both past and current members of the Grants Board believed that the assessment of Small Grants Scheme applications is done efficiently and that deadlines are adhered to. Since applications are only seen by Board members and a member of the Virtual College, rather than a larger group of referees, the turnaround of applications is very quick. However, this streamlined approach is not without problems.

Generally, Board members believed that, since members of the Virtual College do not meet collectively in the same way as the Board and only see a handful of applications a year as opposed to the hundreds seen by Board members, College members have a less rounded view of the funding process. Both past and present Board members stated that College reviews could be unsatisfactory. Comments such as 'this is excellent, fund it' are not sufficient to enable a funding decision to be made. Board members sometimes feel that College members' comments are either overflowing with praise or overflowing with negativity. The reviews given were often not sufficient and did not contain enough information to enable the Board 'to act responsibly' and ensure that money is well spent. They described the College as 'more cavalier' and 'less responsible' than themselves, and would like to see more training for College members and more integration into the whole process of grant awarding.

The streamlined application process also means that since only one Board member and one College member look at the application, they are not necessarily the ideal reviewers for the proposed project. One Board member described how she was expected to be an expert on all applications in her field, and yet this was actually not possible given the range of applications. Another Board member pointed out how it was important for the College reviewer to be well acquainted with the subject area. Otherwise, they could be 'terribly destructive'.

Board members also had criticisms to make of the end-of-award grading system and suggested that it was not appropriate for the Small Grants Scheme. It was suggested that the 'expectations of the benchmarkers are not realistic for the size', that the average time frame is not long enough to complete many outputs and that so 'small grants are unlikely to be outstanding because of the time it takes to produce quality outputs'. Overall, the end-of-award grading was seen as a 'blunt instrument' that does not measure the qualitative aspects of success within a research project.

Virtual College members' perspective

There was a consensus amongst Virtual College members that a streamlined review procedure and quick turnaround of applications is valuable and beneficial to applicants, but that this has to be balanced against workload of assessors. However, they acknowledged that the system is flexible and, when necessary, deadline extensions can be requested. Another point was that it would be easier to keep the deadline if ESRC would send applications directly to assessors rather than via a central institutional contact point. One member suggested an expanded College membership with fewer applications for each member to review per year.

The College discussion covered the issue of risk-taking. Several members thought that ESRC's processes are very careful but rather conservative in outcomes and discourage risk-taking. In part, this is because the outcome of the review process is an average of two assessors' opinions, and novel ideas or methods may, for one assessor, be 'refreshingly creative' but 'profoundly problematic' for the other. One member said: 'Small grants are an opportunity to take some risks with modest sums – and inject a bit more sizzle into the ESRC sausage.'

It was claimed that, when there is a wide disagreement between the rating of a College member and a Board member, it seems insufficient to just get the Board member to think again. Instead, it was suggested that a slightly different process should 'kick in and hang the turnaround times', although it was not specified what this process should entail. One College member suggested that each application should be reviewed by two College members and one Board member, something that would be doable in light of the current discussion of an expanded membership of the College. Alternatively, College members could nominate a second reviewer with expertise in the specific area within the discipline. In opposition to this, other members thought that more reviewers would make the process less efficient. It was also suggested that journal editors were to be consulted when selecting new members of the Virtual College, as they know who are good reviewers.

Virtual College members were asked whether they would find it useful if there was a screening process so that only more robust applications were sent out for review. Several members pointed out that they had not seen any 'appalling' applications or applications with procedural irregularities. Accordingly, they thought that this was not necessary. Not only would it introduce an extra layer of reviewing, which would only cut out a small number of applications, it would also introduce uncertainty about the soundness of this screening judgement.

Another issue raised in the Virtual College discussion was that 'the horror of the Je-S form puts people off from applying'. It was argued that extensive ICT knowledge was required to fill in the form and that there are overlaps between the form and the proposal. A simpler and more user-friendly form and a streamlined format of applications were suggested. For example, one member suggested that it would be mandatory to include objectives, summary, beneficiaries etc. in the proposal, while the form would only need to contain financial section, ethics etc. Besides, a common structure and less repetitive information would make applications more comparable and speed up review turnaround times.

College members were asked whether they normally provided the Grants Board with comments on applications that they review. All members responding to this question said that they did so, although one of them thought that this should be an obligation rather than optional. A couple of members also pointed out that poorer applications necessitate more work and longer comments. One of them

suggested that it would help assessors if a 'checklist' of standard problems with applications were provided, so that assessors could go through and tick this list rather than having to write long comments for applications that suffer from 'generic or naive failings'. Thereby, assessors could spend more time writing supportive comments for promising applications. One member thought that, in reviewing applications, there was a reluctance to use extremes on the rating scale and that excellent projects should get high ratings, while assessors should reject when this is deserved.

Some College members asked for more feedback and consistent communication. One member argued that submitting an application review was like sending it 'into a black hole' with no confirmation of receipt, no feed-back of the outcome of the bid, and only occasionally comments of their fellow assessor. Finally, members asked for more consideration when choosing assessors. Several members had received applications outside their methodological or subject area of expertise.

Learned societies' perspective

One of the learned society representatives thought that, in general, application and assessment processes were well managed, although changes to the forms have made the application process time-consuming and stressful. The other respondent was generally positive about the application process, although it can vary in pace at certain times of the year and that 'the quicker decision-making is important given the time-scales involved in applications and research'. This respondent also argued that, even though processes have improved, there should be fuller feedback: 'given the success rates, it is important to be transparent about outcomes and to use refereeing processes to develop and promote research even if specific projects are not funded'.

Research managers and support officers' perspective

Research managers and support officers generally believed that the open-endedness of the Small Grants Scheme was a good thing, although some reported that, because it was just as long a process as a Standard Grants application, researchers were as likely to go for the larger grants scheme. Some respondents thought that the ESRC website is less navigable than those of other research councils, with essential guideline information disbursed between the electronic form (Je-S) and main ESRC site.

Most respondents found the Je-S form easy enough to use but thought that it could be improved, for instance, by making the link to the Je-S help larger, making it easier to see all resources information in one place and making it easier to export to Excel. Je-S help should also be categorised by research council type than by application type as they vary by research council type. There was concern that some changes had been introduced without warning, for example, justification for resources and size of the section on case for support. Also, case studies of successful applications would be useful.

With regard to the appraisal system, some respondents thought that ESRC should offer training for assessors regarding the peer review process, as EPSRC do. Also, it was argued that quicker decision making and lighter touch processes need to be adopted, and that more transparency was needed for all ESRC applications and grants regarding assessment and committee processes. Another comment was that the Board is too risk-averse. Research managers/support officers reported that the Small Grants Scheme should be the ideal arena to take risks with experimental research but that this is not possible due to the conservatism of reviewers.

Finally, more communication with research officers was recommended, using ARMA as a vehicle. Some research managers/support officers argued that many academics do not see ESRC as approachable and suggested that processes applied by EPSRC could be used. These include visiting universities and creating account managers, that is, a liaison role developing relationships with universities and working with local research managers.

Summary

The evaluation shows that the Scheme operates well overall. The process is streamlined with a majority of funding decisions within 15 weeks, and award-holders were generally satisfied with the application form and guidelines, support from ESRC staff, and management/administration of their grant. In 2004/2005, the success rate was 36 percent, which can be compared to 19 percent for the Standard Grants Scheme. This meant that 41 percent of all Alpha graded applications were funded, compared to 23 percent for the Standard Grants Scheme.

However, based on comments on specific parts of the application process, we still think that there is room for improvements. The application form met with

criticism indicating that it is repetitive and time-consuming. It would be helpful if the form was revised to avoid repetition of information given in the proposal, for example, through more specific instructions on which sections should be included in the main proposal. As pointed out by a College member, this would also facilitate assessments of applications as they would be more comparable. It would also be helpful if it was possible to save the form in other formats so that applicants can revisit the form even though the software has been updated. We also think that support might be enhanced, for example, by making the Je-S help larger on the screen and categorise it by research council type, making it easier to see all resources information in one place on the form, providing a sample form and giving clearer information on whom to contact for support.

Similarly, the assessment process could be improved. This process is crucial for the success of the Scheme. To ensure the quality of the assessment process, we think that it is fundamental that applications are sent to College members with expertise in the area, something that was emphasised by both Board and College members. If there is no member with relevant expertise, a College member could be asked to nominate an external assessor. For the same reason, training of College members would be useful, especially since many of them are not likely to assess more than a few applications per year. To further enhance their assessment skills and to make them feel appreciated for their work, we think that ESRC should make sure that College members are always notified of funding decisions that are based on their assessments.

Furthermore, we would support a point made by College members and recommend ESRC develop a checklist of standard problems with applications. This would avoid assessors writing long comments on poor applications and give them more time to write supportive comments on promising applications. As Board members have expressed concerns about the superficiality of comments from College assessors, we suggest that instructions to College members are clarified. The evaluation also revealed criticism against reconsideration of applications when there are disagreements between the assessors. Here, we agree with the suggestion of involving both the Board assessor and the College assessor in reassessing the application, even though this may mean a longer turnaround time. However, this could be reduced by direct telephone conversations about a disputed proposal.

We also think that it would be useful if money could be spent beyond the award end date, especially with regard to dissemination activities. However, we do appreciate that this might not be possible for practical reasons, such as budget monitoring. Therefore, an alternative suggestion is to state this condition more clearly in application guidelines.

Furthermore, we think that it would be constructive to undertake a review of the purpose and system of end-of-award grading. This grading is simplistic in that it does not reflect the multifaceted characteristic of research outcome and impact. The grading is further complicated by the delay in getting research outputs published, which is particularly problematic in the evaluation of short projects. Similar points were made by Board members. Considering the length of projects funded by the Scheme, they argued that the grading was not appropriate and realistic, and it does not measure qualitative aspects of success within research projects.

In other words, the evaluation identified confusion or lack of clarity in several areas suggesting that there is a need for better communication about the operation of the Scheme. It is also essential that there is a transparency in how a scheme like this is run, in particular with regard to the assessment process and funding decisions. For these reasons, we believe that the Scheme would benefit from improved communication both between the Board and the College, and between ESRC and the research community.

Profile of the Scheme

Database analysis

Database analysis shows that the typical Small Grant award-holder has a PhD, is in his/her early 40s (average age: 42.6) and works at a university established before 1992.

In the last twelve years, the proportion of professors and staff without any form of academic title being awarded Small Grants has declined, whilst the proportion of doctors being awarded Small Grants has risen (Figure 3). The average age of award-holders has been stable (early to mid-forties). The proportion of award-holders from pre- and post-1992 universities has remained unchanged during the period studied. Finally, the dominance of some disciplines appears to be

increasing (Table 1). In particular, the proportion of grants awarded to psychology has increased substantially.

Figure 3: Small Grants award-holders by academic title (N=1549)

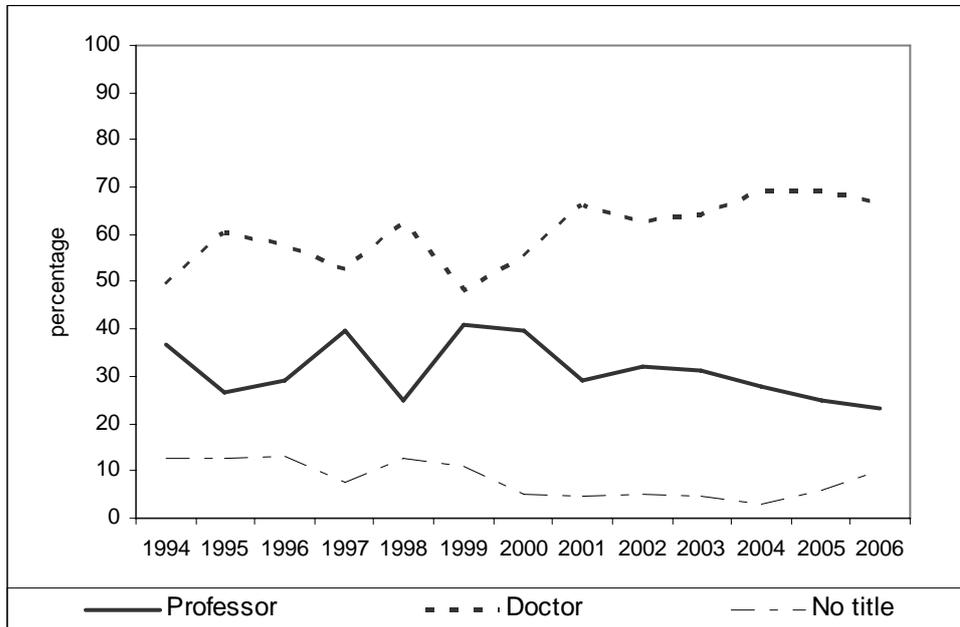


Table 1: Percentage of Small Grants award-holders by discipline (N=1545)

Year	'94	'95	'96	'97	'98	'99	'00	'01	'02	'03	'04	'05	'06
Area and development studies	0	0	0	0	0.8	0	1.0	1.3	0	1.3	0.6	2.3	0
Area studies	1.4	1.2	0	1.1	0	1.6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Arts and humanities													
Demography													
Economic and social history	9.9	9.3	3.1	0	6.7	3.9	4.9	6.0	6.8	5.2	4.0	1.2	6.7
Economics	14.1	11.6	15.3	13.2	13.4	14.2	11.7	13.2	12.7	19.6	13.1	16.8	16.7
Education	7.0	16.3	8.2	9.9	14.3	5.5	6.8	7.9	8.5	3.9	5.7	6.9	16.7
Environmental planning / Planning	4.2	4.7	2.0	0	3.4	1.6	2.9	0	4.2	1.3	1.1	1.7	3.3
Environmental sciences													
Human geography	4.2	4.7	6.1	9.9	9.2	7.1	8.7	4.0	9.3	3.9	5.7	2.3	3.3
Interdisciplinary studies	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1.3	2.5	0.7	5.7	2.3	0
Linguistics	2.8	9.3	9.2	5.5	3.4	5.5	1.0	3.3	4.2	5.9	3.4	4.6	3.3
Management and business studies	5.6	7.0	8.2	3.3	0.8	9.4	5.8	4.0	4.2	2.6	5.7	4.0	6.7
Political science and international relations / studies	15.5	5.8	4.1	23.1	13.4	6.3	8.7	10.6	3.4	5.2	4.5	6.7	0
Psychology	9.9	11.6	18.4	16.5	22.7	15.0	22.3	22.5	23.7	31.4	29.0	32.9	23.3
Science and technology studies													
Social anthropology	1.4	2.3	3.1	3.3	1.7	2.4	5.8	2.6	3.4	3.9	2.8	2.3	3.3
Social policy	2.8	3.5	2.0	1.1	0	3.1	2.9	5.3	4.2	2.0	4.0	3.5	3.3
Social work													
Socio-legal studies	2.8	4.7	5.1	3.3	0	3.1	2.9	3.3	0	3.9	0.6	0.6	0
Sociology	16.9	8.1	14.3	6.6	7.6	17.3	10.7	12.6	9.3	8.5	12.5	9.8	13.3
Statistics, computing and methodology / methods and computing	1.4	0	1.0	3.3	2.5	3.9	3.9	2.0	3.4	0.7	1.7	2.3	0

During the period of 1987-2006, Small Grants projects were most commonly valued at between £40,000 and £60,000, with 46 percent of the projects belonging to this group. However, it should be noted that projects of more than £45,000 have only been awarded since September 2003, when the cash-limit for Small Grant projects was increased to this amount. A majority of the projects run for between one and two years (62%), with only 3 percent of them running for 4 years or more. There does not appear to be any discernible trend in the length of project being funded by the Small Grants Scheme.

There are some differences between the characteristics of award-holders and applicants in that award-holders are more likely to be a professor (Figure 4) and to work at a university established before 1992 (Figure 5).

Figure 4: Small Grants award-holders and applicants by academic title (1987–2006) (award-holders N=1633, all applications N=4764)

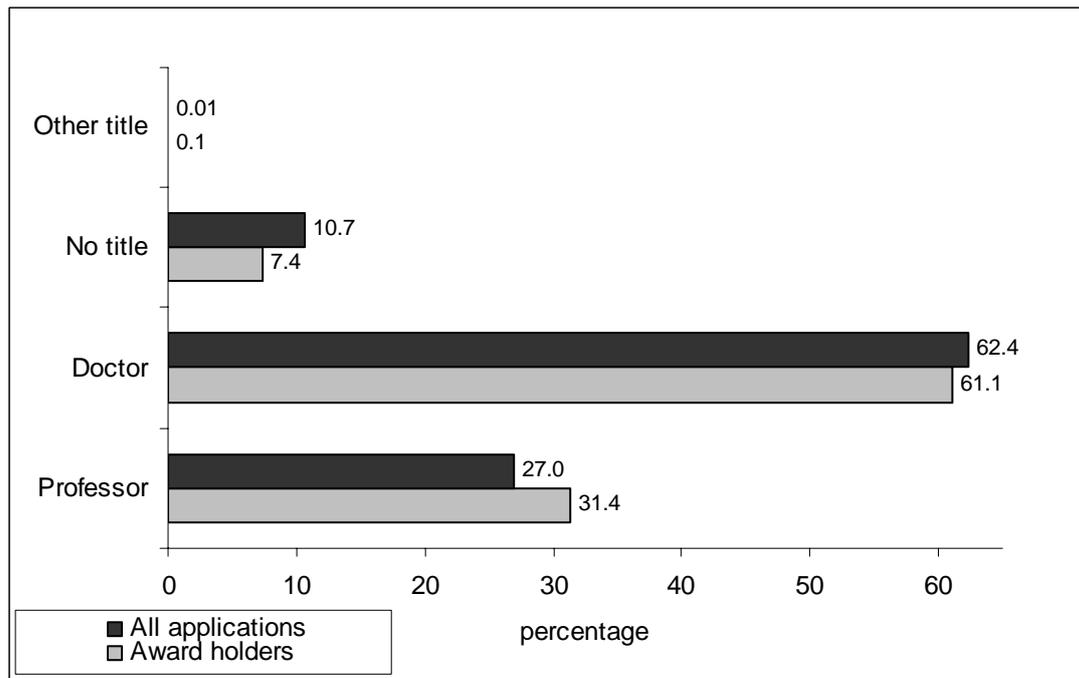
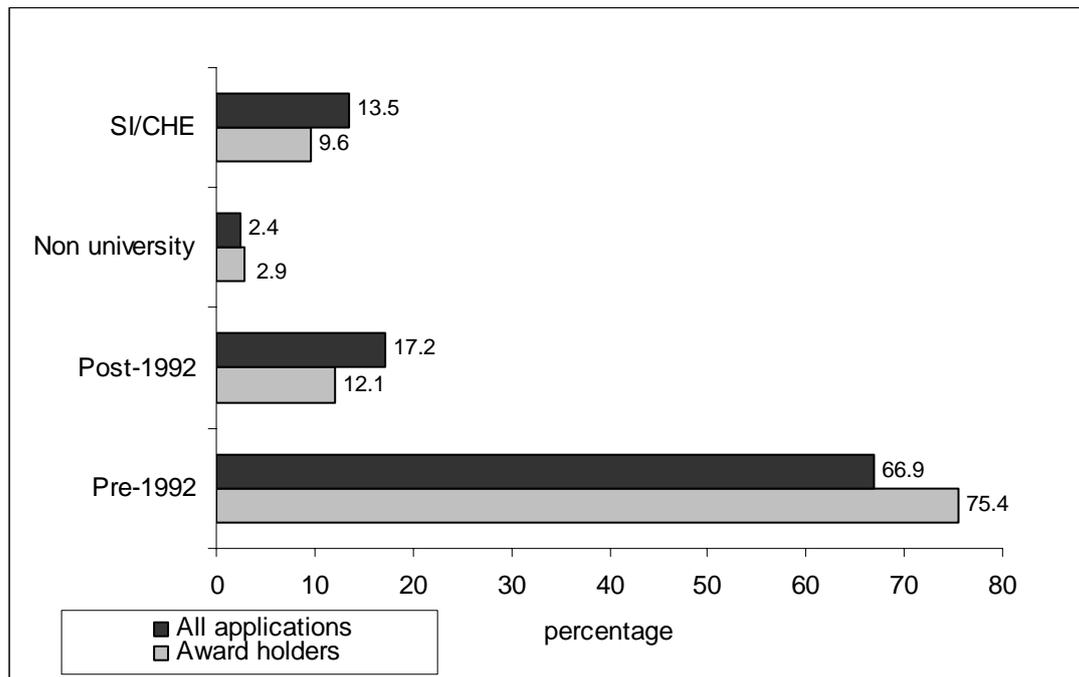


Figure 5: Small Grants award-holders and applicants by institution type (1987–2006)
(award-holders N=1633, all applications N=4714)



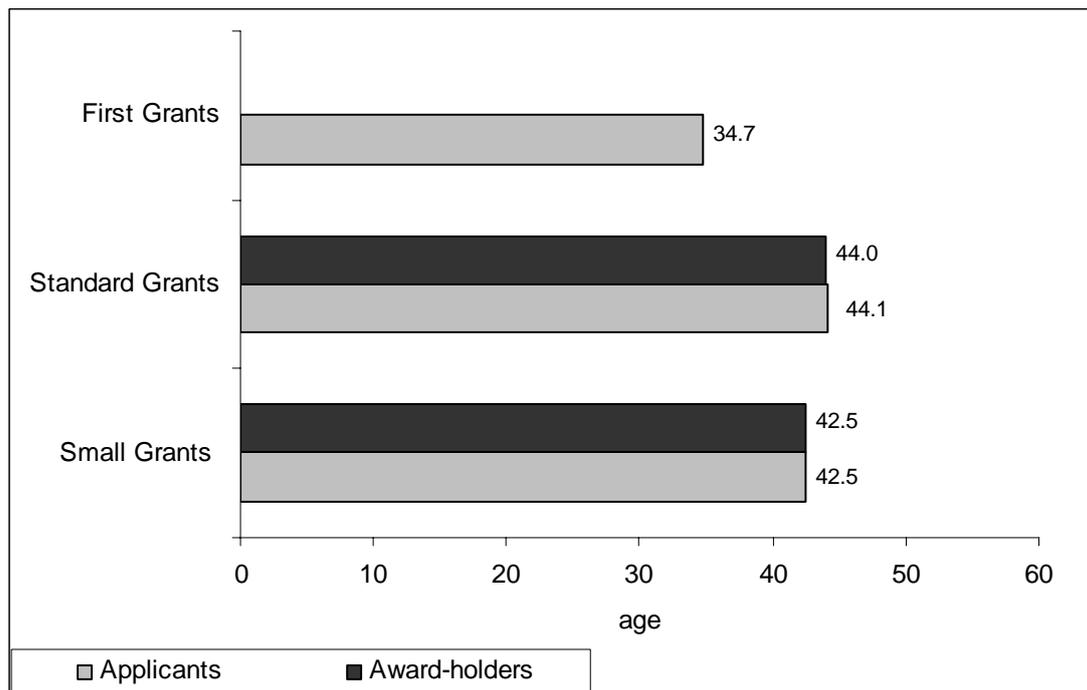
Psychology was the most common disciplinary background of both applicants and award-holders, followed by economics and sociology (Table 2).

Table 2: Small Grants award-holders and applicants by discipline (1987–2006) (award-holders N=1629, all applications N=4746)

	Award-holders %	Applications %
Area and development studies	0.7	0.7
Area studies	0.3	0.4
Arts and humanities		0.1
Demography		0.01
Economic and social history	5.0	3.5
Economics	14.2	11.9
Education	7.9	10.9
Environmental planning / Planning	2.1	2.6
Environmental sciences		
Human geography	5.8	5.1
Interdisciplinary studies	1.2	1.8
Linguistics	4.7	3.0
Management and business studies	5.6	8.9
Political science and international relations / studies	7.9	7.9
Psychology	23.0	21.3
Science and technology studies	0.1	0.01
Social anthropology	3.0	2.2
Social policy	3.2	4.0
Social work		0.1
Socio-legal studies	2.1	2.3
Sociology	11.0	11.2
Statistics, computing and methodology / methods and computing	2.1	1.9

Both Small Grants applicants and award-holders are, on average, approximately two years younger than applicants and award-holders for the Standard Grants Scheme. First Grants Scheme applicants are, on average, younger than both the other schemes (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Average age of applicants and award-holders (1987–2006) (Small Grants applicants N=4501, award-holders N=1460; Standard Grants applicants N=8903, award-holders N=2122; First Grants applicants N=129)



The Small Grants Scheme, along with the First Grants Scheme, attracts more applicants from post-1992 universities than the Standard Grants Scheme (Figure 7), and more Small than Standard Grants are awarded to applicants from these institutions (Figure 8).

Figure 7: Institution type of applicants (1987–2006) (Small Grants N=4714, Standard Grants N=9366, First Grants N=152)

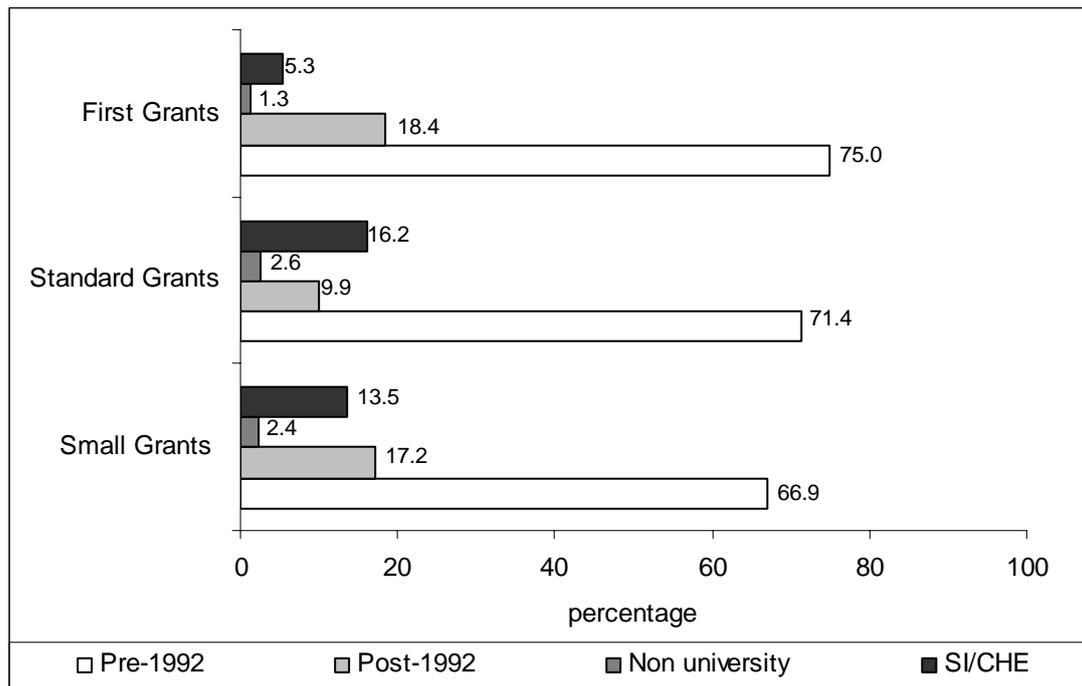
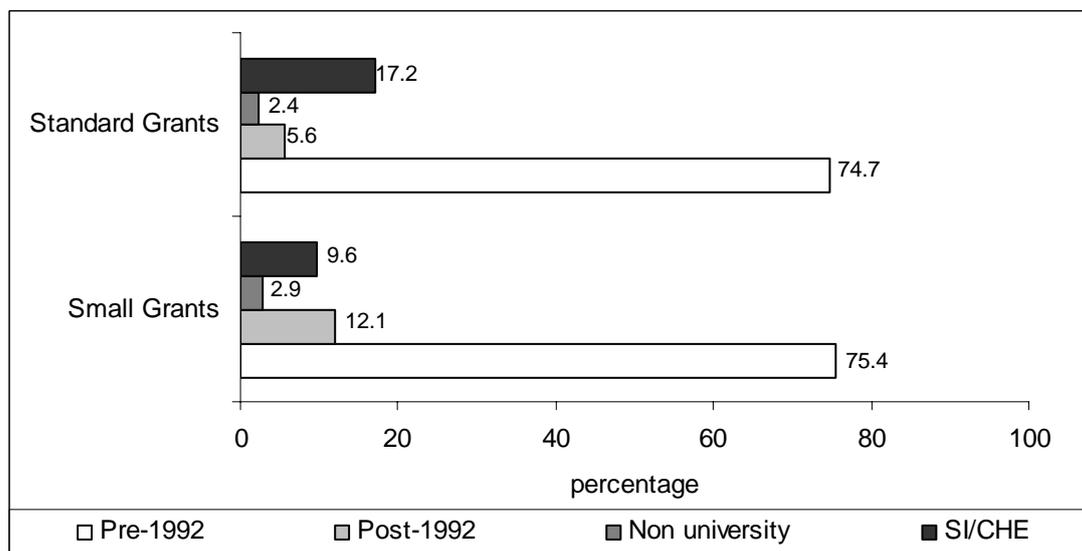


Figure 8: Institution type of award-holders (1987–2006) (Small Grants N=1633, Standard Grants N=2286)



Another difference between the schemes is that a lower proportion of professors applies for (Figure 9) and is awarded (Figure 10) Small Grants than Standard Grants.

Figure 9: Academic title of applicants (1987-2006) (Small Grants N=4746, Standard Grants N=9910, First Grants N=152)

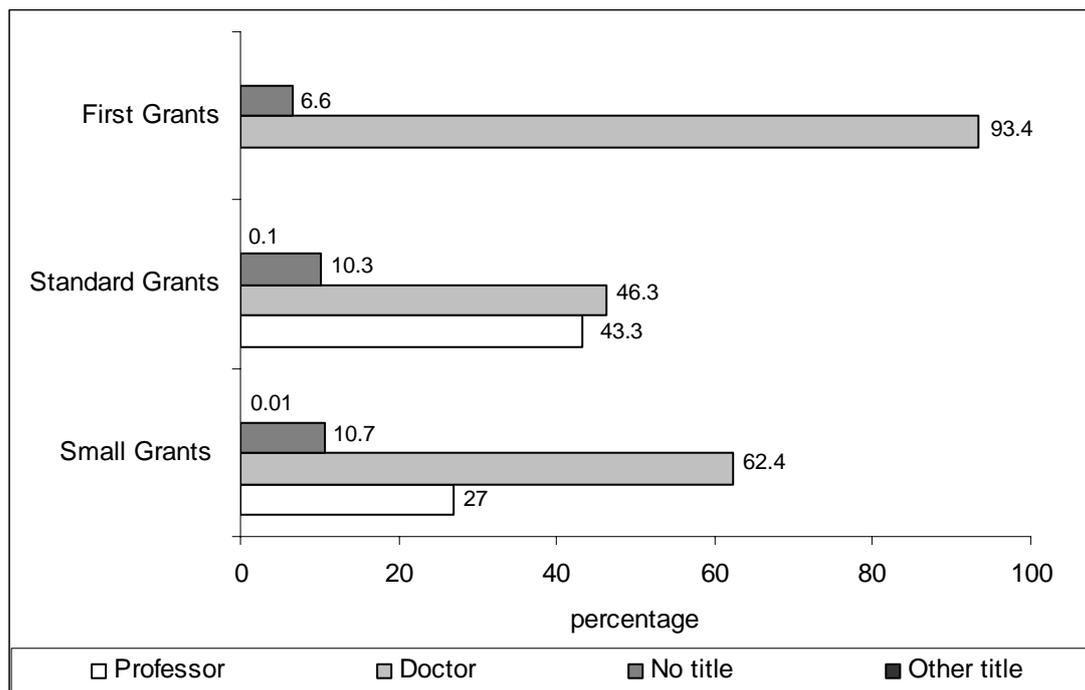
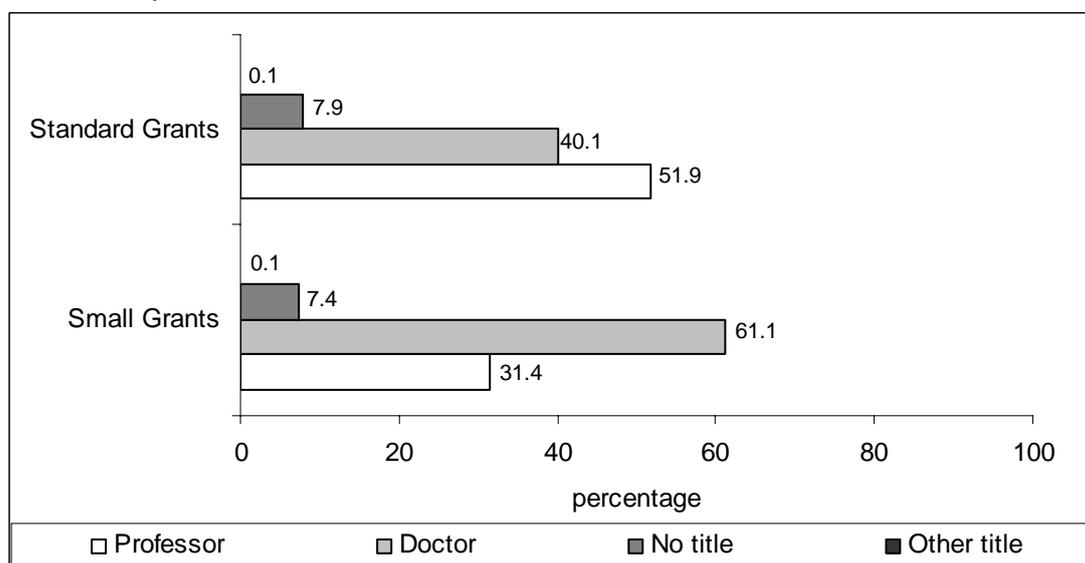


Figure 10: Academic title of award-holders (1987-2006) (Small Grants N=1633, Standard Grants 2289)



Finally, the high proportion of certain disciplines – such as psychology, economy and sociology – within the Small Grants Scheme is replicated in the Standard and First Grants Schemes (Table 3).

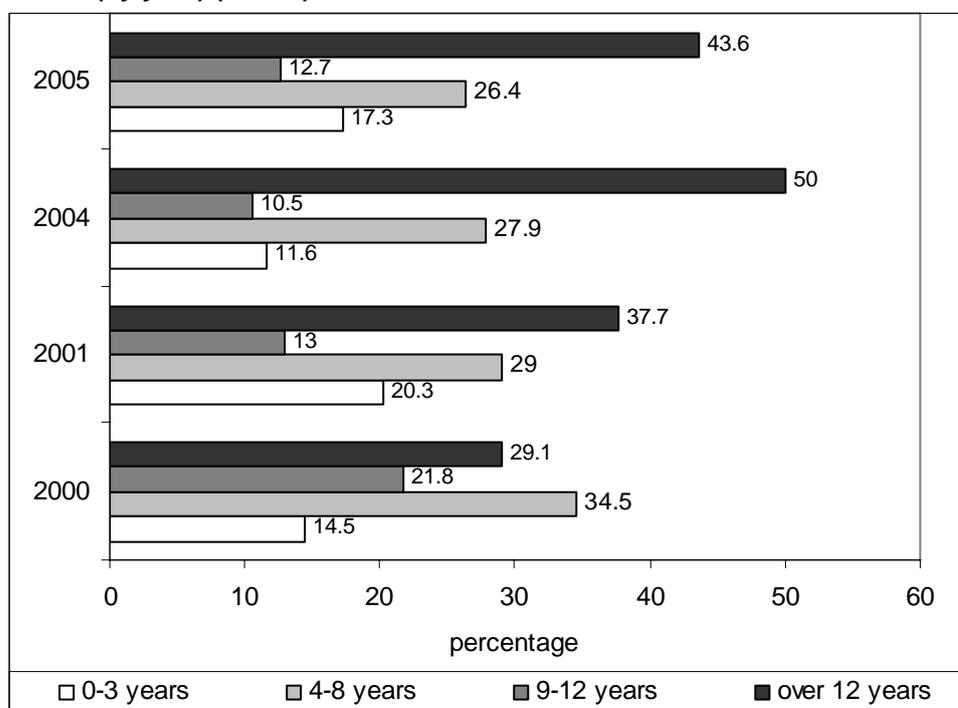
Table 3: Proportion of discipline of applicants and award-holders (1987-2006) (Small Grants applicants N=4746, award-holders N=1629; Standard Grants applicants N=9674, award-holders N=2285; First Grants applicants N=152)

	Small Grants applicants	Standard Grants applicants	First Grants applicants	Small Grants award-holders	Standard Grants award-holders
Area and development studies	0.7	0.1	4.6	0.7	0.3
Area studies	0.4	0.9	0.0	0.3	0.7
Arts and humanities	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Demography	0.01	0.01	0.7	0.0	0.0
Economic and social history	3.5	5.3	3.3	5.0	7.3
Economics	11.9	9.8	12.5	14.2	11.3
Education	10.9	11.6	6.6	7.9	10.1
Environmental planning/Planning	2.6	2.1	2.6	2.1	1.5
Environmental sciences	0.0	0.01	0.0	0.0	0.0
Human geography	5.1	5.7	5.3	5.8	6.3
Interdisciplinary studies	1.8	0.8	0.0	1.2	0.4
Linguistics	3.0	3.2	2.0	4.7	4.6
Management and business studies	8.9	9.4	11.2	5.6	5.8
Political science and international relations/studies	7.9	6.5	7.9	7.9	7.0
Psychology	21.3	17.3	21.1	23.0	16.5
Science and technology studies	0.01	0.01	1.3	0.1	0.0
Social anthropology	2.2	3.8	0.7	3.0	5.5
Social policy	4.0	5.0	1.3	3.2	3.4
Social work	0.1	0.01	0.7	0.0	0.01
Socio-legal studies	2.3	2.6	2.0	2.1	2.5
Sociology	11.2	13.5	15.1	11.0	13.8
Statistics, computing and methodology/methods and computing				2.1	2.8

Award-holders' perspective

The majority of the award-holders surveyed were men (61%) and of white British or other white origin (93%). Their average age was 47.5 years. Many of them had long experience of working as a researcher. In fact, more than 40 percent of them had done so for more than 12 years prior to receiving the Small Grant. There has been a growing tendency to award Small Grants to more experienced applicants¹⁷ (Figure 11). Almost all of the award-holders (90%) had a PhD, ND, DPT or equivalent at the time of application, and usually they worked in a department or school which had received ESRC grants within the last five years (91%).

Figure 11: How long had you been working as a researcher prior to receiving the Small Grant? (by year) (N=320)



Forty percent of the surveyed award-holders had obtained their Small Grant on their first submission to ESRC. A third of the award-holders had previously submitted an application to the Small Grants Scheme (Table 4). This is at the same level as previous applications to the Standard Grants Scheme but more common than applications to an ESRC research programme.

Table 4: Was this your first application to the ESRC? (total across years) (N=333)

	n	%
Yes	134	40.2
No	199	59.8
I have previously applied to		
...ESRC Small Grants Scheme	110	33.0
...ESRC Standard Grants Scheme	109	32.7
...ESRC research programme	70	21.0

Over half of the award-holders stated that this was their first grant from ESRC, while others had previously held a Small Grant, a Standard Grant or a grant from a research programme (Table 5).

Table 5: Was this your first grant from ESRC? (total across years) (N=319)

	n	%
Yes	175	54.9
No	144	45.1
I have previously had funding from		
...ESRC Small Grants Scheme	81	25.4
...ESRC Standard Grants Scheme	64	20.1
...ESRC research programme	38	11.9

In addition, a third of the award-holders (33%) had previously worked on an ESRC-funded project, although not as principal applicant or co-grant-holder (Figure 12), with a trend for this to become more and more common¹⁸. A few award-holders had held grants from another research council including AHRC, BBSRC, EPSRC, MRC or NERC (Table 6).

Figure 12: At the time of application, had you ever worked on an ESRC-funded project previously, although you were not the principal applicant or a co-grant holder? (by year) (N=317)

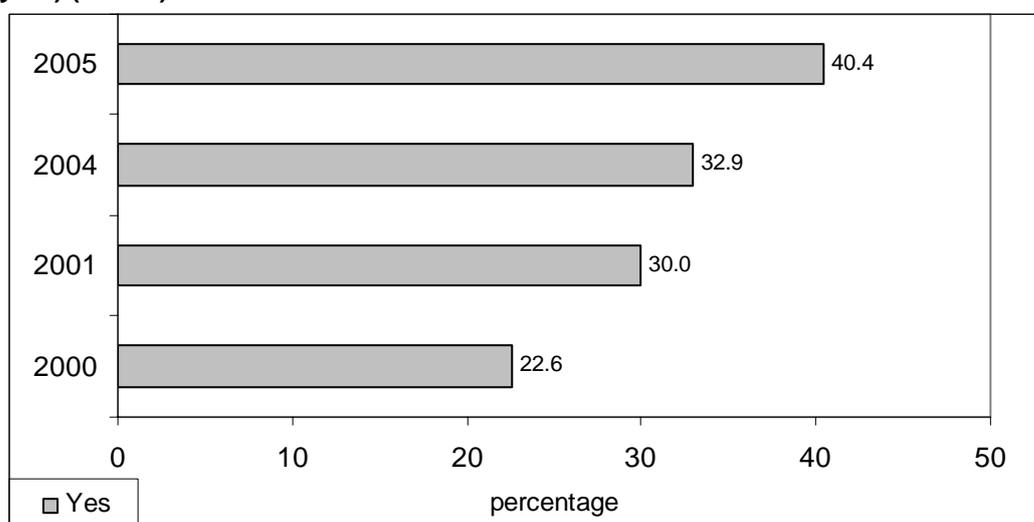
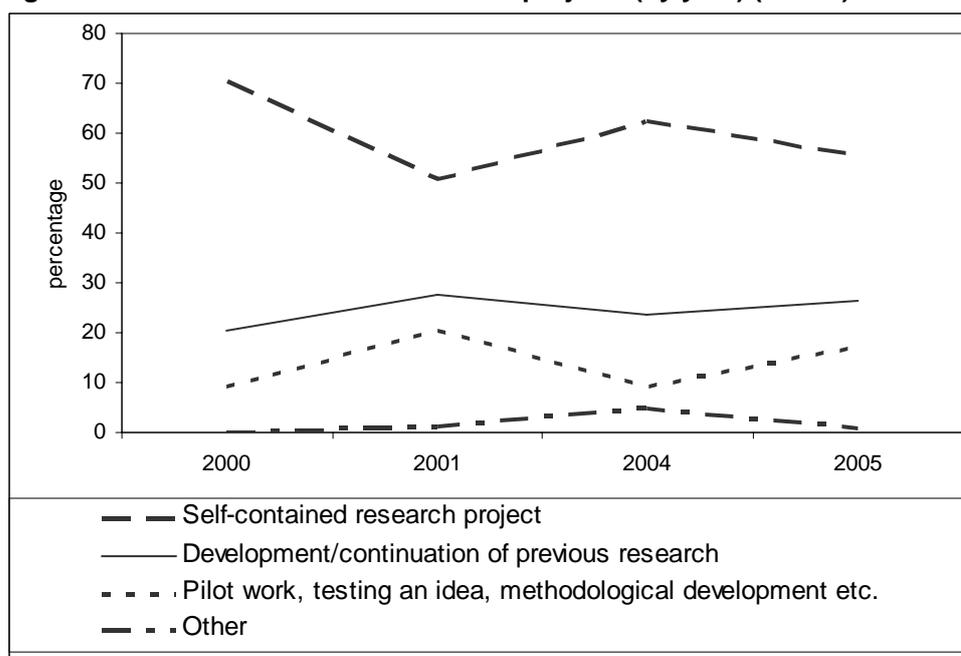


Table 6: At the time of application, had you previously successfully obtained funding from any other research council? (total across years) (N=329)

	n	%
No	276	83.9
Yes	53	16.1
...by AHRC	6	1.8
...by BBSRC	5	1.5
...by EPSRC	13	4.0
...by MRC	17	5.2
...by NERC	1	0.0

The majority of the award-holders classified their Small Grants project as a self-contained research project (59%), although it was not uncommon with classifications such as 'development/continuation of previous research' (24%) or 'pilot work, testing an idea, methodological development etc.' (14%) (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Classification of Small Grants projects (by year) (N=318)



Past and present Grants Board members' perspective

Small Grant applications are not assessed anonymously and it was suggested by some Board members that 'big names' are judged, not just on their application, but also on their track record and reputation. For others, the name of the university or department could be influential in funding decisions. The job of the Board members is to 'pick winners' and this can be difficult if the process is anonymous. This coupled with the support and guidance available in established departments or universities means that in some universities the 'odds are stacked

against you' being awarded a grant. One Board member suggested that there was 'possibly a tendency to fund boring research' and that originality is not a tightly defined concept. This member described the whole scheme as 'risk averse'.

On the other hand, the tacit assumption amongst board members, that Small Grants are for junior researchers, leads at least some Board members to give the 'benefit of the doubt' and not be 'so strict' with junior researchers whilst things are stricter 'if they are well established'. However, it is not felt amongst Board members that there is a difference in quality between Small and Standard Grants applicants and 'increasingly it is the same people' [who apply to the two schemes].

Board members generally agree that it is easier for some disciplines to obtain Small Grants funding and also, there is broad agreement about why this is so. Some disciplines fit quite easily into a 'scientific model' and it is possible that assessors are too harsh on subjects that do not fit into this model. In addition, Board members suggested that it is easier to criticise research proposals that are not steeped in technical language. One member stated 'the more people that can understand a proposal, the more it can be criticised' and given the essentially 'negative nature' of reviewing, this tended to work against some disciplines. It was also suggested that some disciplines are small and that everyone knows everyone else and they tend to support each other's work and proposals.

Virtual College members' perspective

Virtual College members pointed out that the Small Grants Scheme offers a good opportunity for inexperienced researchers to obtain research funding and 'get them started'. There was a more mixed view on senior academics: some members thought that this was an 'easy way' for senior academics to get funding and made it difficult for junior academics to compete, others were strongly opposed to discrimination against senior academics. Some members emphasised that the Scheme should be open to 'any seniority of academic' and not targeted at any particular kind of applicant. Some projects do not justify an application for a large grant (for example, a small-scale, developmental work that may lead to larger project) and this is independent of the seniority of the applicant and might include a team of people at different career levels.

Another argument for not targeting the Small Grants Scheme at junior researchers is that there already are schemes to cater for different career levels.

Nevertheless, there was a concern that a criterion often used by reviewers is prior track record, which means that 'new comers' (that is, 'non experienced ESRC award-getters') become disadvantaged from the start. In this respect, the First Grants Scheme should not be seen as a substitute for a Small Grant in the case of early career researchers, since they might want to collaborate with senior academics in projects that are better funded via the Small Grants Scheme.

Virtual College members were asked about the fact that Small Grants Scheme awards are not evenly distributed across disciplines. Some members pointed out that it is up to discipline communities to become aware of the problem and 'self-educate' as well as 'self-police'. Other members argued that some disciplines seems more critical than others, that there might be prejudice from one sub-discipline to another, and that some reviewers act as 'gate-keepers' rejecting proposals on areas in which the reviewer has a record but is not cited. Although members valued fair access to grants, it was emphasised that applications should be judged on merit. One member suggested that, if ESRC wants to stimulate research within a particular discipline, it should develop a specific research programme accordingly and 'leave the Small Grants Scheme alone'. Another suggestion was to send all applications to assessors from two or three different disciplines.

Learned societies' perspective

The learned society representatives were of the opinion that the Small Grants Scheme should support academic research generally, that is, be open to all academics and those linked to academic and research institutions. Both respondents said that the Scheme should support 'a diverse range of research in the ESRC area and develop high quality research'.

They also agreed that the Scheme should be an open response. One of them argued that this would reflect 'the full range of what is currently being considered and not just the interests of a group of academics or policy-related people'. This respondent acknowledged that choices still need to be made, but that those who select applications for funding should be offered the full range of current work. The other respondent thought that the responsive mode is valuable for 'allowing innovation in the research agendas across subjects'. Also, this respondent thought that there was merit in creating space for researchers to undertake focused research as well as facilitating pilot projects.

However, one learned society response showed a concern about the impact of full economic costing on senior researchers who are committed to doing their own fieldwork, since it is almost impossible to fit in the full salary of someone on professorial grade. The alternative, to employ a Research Assistant to undertake the fieldwork and analysis, is an 'essentially science model' that does not fit all kinds of research. As a consequence, the quality of ethnographic work will be seriously compromised. The respondent concluded: 'I do not think that it is right for ESRC effectively to rule out certain methodologies'.

As shown above, some disciplines are more successful in obtaining funding from the Small Grants Scheme than other disciplines. Regarding this, one learned society respondent pointed out that there are problems in that people making the judgements, although not consciously biased, are inevitably affected by their own background: 'It is hard not to think that work in your own field is particularly important'. The other respondent argued that 'it is important to fund the best research, which implies uneven outcomes'. This respondent thought that disciplinary focus by panellists may be a limitation on funding in some areas and continued:

A steering mechanism would be valuable in creating transparency but not if it introduced programme grant thinking into the responsive mode.

The other respondent did not think that quotas for subjects would be the answer, as this would go against the principle of choosing the best and since establishing the quotas would be contentious. Instead, this respondent thought that there was a need for a more active attempt to recruit people from diverse backgrounds into the structure of ESRC committees and advisory bodies:

It is too much like a club in which certain networks and areas predominate. This [recruitment] might include giving thought to increasing the numbers from less well-represented disciplines.

Research managers and support officers' perspective

Research managers and officers were asked why some disciplines were better than others at attracting Small Grants Scheme funding, and whether applications should be judged purely on merit or if some kind of steering mechanism should be introduced. It was generally believed that some disciplines (such as linguistics and psychology) were used to using the 'science model' in applications and

therefore found it easier to demonstrate value for money, as did projects using existing data sets.

Respondents also cast doubt on the reviewing process, which varies by discipline. Some respondents thought that more training for reviewers would help, as in some disciplines reviewers are believed to be more rigorous than in others and thus tend to hurt their own discipline's chances of obtaining funding. Despite these problems, all of the respondents favoured retaining a merit-based selection process, with any disciplinary imbalances addressed by specific calls for proposals. In addition, there should be more dissemination of information about the opportunities and process of applying in certain disciplines.

Furthermore, it was stated that projects that rely on the significant input of a professorial or senior applicant and that aim to generate data and employ a research assistant/associate are unlikely to be affordable for less than £100k. Consequently, the process is seen as debarring methodologies often employed in, for example, sociological and political studies.

Because of full economic costing and having to declare the full cost of the principal investigator, it was also argued that senior people are reluctant to be significantly involved and, therefore, they tend to apply for the Standard Grants Scheme instead. The Small Grants Scheme is thus becoming the 'first call' for newer members of staff and to get some research experience. Nevertheless, respondents also pointed out that an increased cash limit would be helpful, as it is impossible to attract good researchers on 3- or 6-month contracts. If the limit was increased to £120k–£150k, they could be employed for a whole year.

Other respondents believed the Scheme could be redesigned specifically as a pilot support scheme. However, because of the rise in funding to a maximum of £100k the Small Grants Scheme has renewed impact vis-à-vis the Standard Grants, as it is more flexible and useful for short speculative research. Respondents argued that it can be a stepping-stone to larger awards. However, for some the funding is still too low especially considering that the application and development work needed is the same as for the larger award.

Summary

This evaluation shows that funding from the Small Grants Scheme was not equally distributed across different groups of academics. Even though the Scheme

attracted a larger proportion of applications from junior academics than the Standard Grants Scheme, most award-holders had long experience of research and over half of them had previously held an ESRC grant.

As mentioned in the section 'Purpose of the Small Grants Scheme', there was confusion regarding the target group of the Scheme. On one hand, the Scheme is advertised as especially useful for junior academics and Board members discussed the Scheme in such terms. On the other hand, College members argued that it should be open also for senior academics and current consideration of prior track record in the review process actually means that junior academics are disadvantaged. Even though the Small Grants Scheme is more inclusive than the Standard Grants Scheme, this can be illustrated by the fact that 27 percent of the applicants to the Small Grants Scheme were professors compared to 31 percent of the award-holders. Over the years, there is also a tendency of larger proportions of grants awarded to applicants with previous experience of working on an ERSC project.

Confusion regarding the target group of the Scheme has implications for who will submit applications, with a risk that potential applicants do not think that the Scheme is aimed at them. An emphasis on junior researchers also means that the Scheme seems somewhat redundant considering that there is now a First Grant Scheme. Consequently, we do not think that there is a need to promote the Small Grants Scheme as a scheme for junior academics. At the same time, it is unfortunate if junior academics are disadvantaged in the assessment process. For that reason, we would argue that high quality applications should be supported, even if the applicants do not have a good track record in research.

There are further inequalities as to which groups of academics received funding from the Small Grants Scheme. One of them is that applicants from post-1992 universities were still less successful in obtaining funding than applicants from pre-1992 universities, with 17 percent of applicants but only 12 percent of award-holders being based at post-1992 universities. The majority of award-holders worked in a department/school that had received ESRC grants within the last five years and a third of them had worked on an ESRC project prior to their application. Our interpretation of these findings is that there might be a lack of support and experience of research council funding within certain institutions.

There is also an uneven distribution of awards across disciplines with higher proportions of both applications from and awarded grants to psychology, economy and sociology. This pattern was replicated in the Standard and First Grants Schemes. There was a consensus across different groups that the Scheme should continue to judge applications on merit and not introduce a quota for different disciplines. We agree with this and with the suggestion that if ESRC wants to stimulate research within a particular discipline it should develop a research programme accordingly. It was also suggested that disciplines should self-educate. In addition to this, the issue of varying success rates amongst different groups of academics (including academics from certain disciplines, at post-1992 and with less research experience) could be addressed with more information about funding opportunities and the application process. For example, this could be done via seminars and workshops, and via more communication and collaboration with research managers.

A final point relating to the profile of the Scheme is to what extent Small Grants should be a stepping-stone towards larger grants and a way of testing out innovative or riskier ideas and methods. Some research managers and support officers argued that the Scheme should be redesigned as a pilot support scheme. College members and research managers/support officers thought that the process is conservative, discouraging risk-taking. Board members described College assessors as less responsible. Putting this in perspective, this evaluation shows that 14 percent of the award-holders classified their project as 'pilot work, testing an idea, methodological development, etc'.

We think that a Board discussion leading to clarifications of the policy on risk-taking within the Small Grants Scheme is essential, since disagreement on this matter has implications for the assessment of applications, for transparency of the assessment process, and for potential applicants' decision to submit applications to the Scheme. Preferably, this discussion should directly involve the Virtual College. At a minimum, the outcome of the discussion should be communicated to the College. There is an opportunity for the Small Grants Scheme to embrace a wider range and types of projects from a wider set of applicants, including projects with non-standard or non-traditional methodological elements.

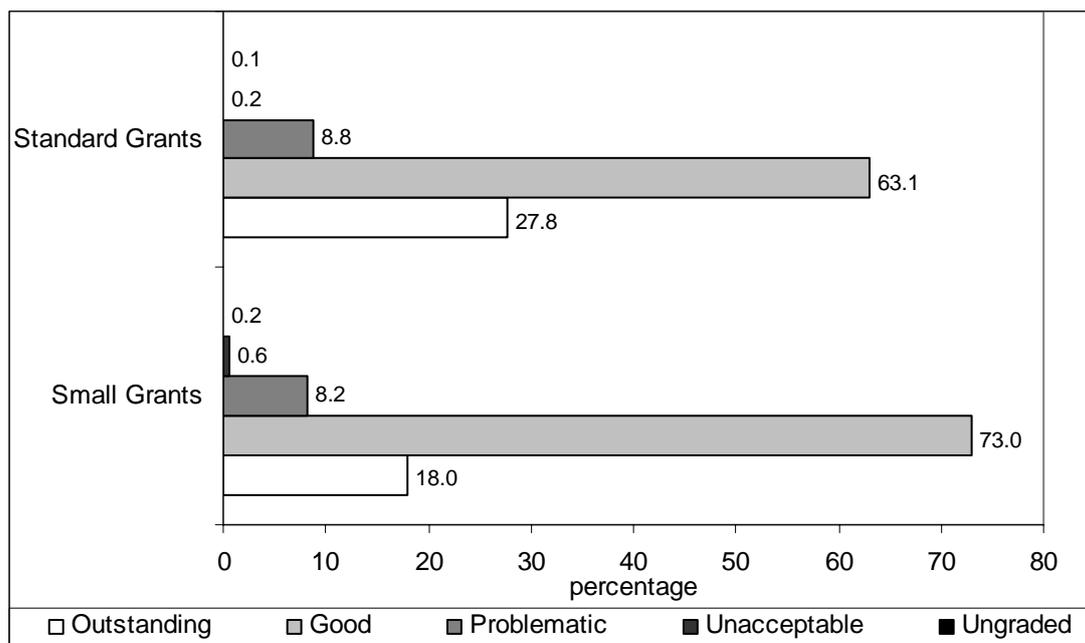
Performance and impact of the Scheme

Documentary and database analysis

At the end of each Small Grants project, the award is evaluated and given an overall grade. Documentary analysis¹⁹ shows that, 73 percent of the projects that were completed between 1995 and 2005 were graded as good and 18 percent as outstanding, while 9 percent were problematic or unacceptable.

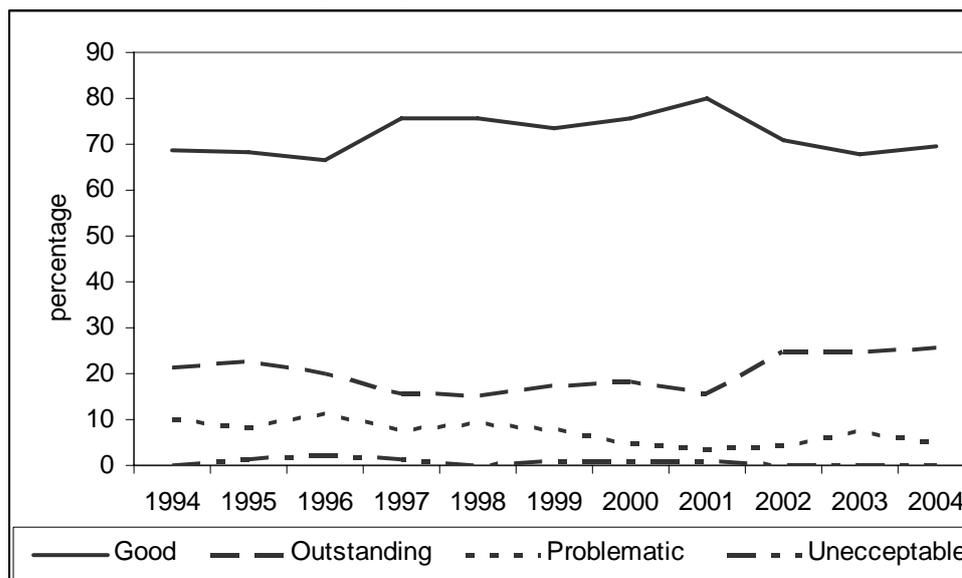
In general, Standard Grants projects received better end-of-award grading than Small Grants projects. The proportion of outstanding and good projects taken together was just over 90 percent within both schemes, but there was a higher proportion of outstanding projects in the Standard Grants Scheme (Figure 14).

Figure 14: End-of-award grade for Small and Standard Grants (1995-2005) (Small Grants N=1202, Standard Grants N=1255)



However, database analysis shows that in recent years there has been an increasing proportion of Small Grants projects graded as outstanding²⁰ (Figure 15).

Figure 15: End-of-award grading within the Small Grants Scheme (by year) (N=1173)



Analysis of ESRC data detailing the outputs from Small Grant projects from 2002 to the present day suggest that on average there were 1.14 outputs per project, including articles, books, book chapters, conference papers, and journal articles. This was less than for Standard Grants, where the average was 5.97 outputs per project.

Table 7 gives a breakdown of the numbers and types of outputs produced from Small and Standard Grants. The most striking difference is that award-holders of Small Grants were less likely to present their findings at conferences than award-holders of Standard Grants. Over half of Standard Grant outputs were conference papers (55.6%), while under a third of Small Grant awards (29.6%) were presented at conferences.

Table 7: Number of outputs from Small Grants and Standard Grants (2002-present)

	Small Grants (N=732)		Standard Grants (N=77)	
	n	%	n	%
Article	83	9.9	34	7.4
Book	17	2.0	8	1.7
Book chapter	44	5.3	61	13.3
Conference paper	248	29.7	256	55.7
Journal article	204	24.4	91	19.8
Other publications/reports	10	1.2	4	0.9
Dataset	21	2.5		
Software/multimedia packages	2	0.2		
Working publication	59	7.1		
Generic	148	17.7		
Discussion papers			6	1.3
Total	836	100	460	100

Award-holders' perspective

So, do Small Grants lead to further applications and research? The survey shows that the majority of award-holders (78%) had been an applicant on further research proposals since being awarded the ESRC Small Grant (Table 8). Perhaps not surprisingly, this is more common amongst award-holders that completed their project in 2000 or 2001 than amongst award-holders completing in 2004 or 2005²¹. Taken together, 60 percent of the award-holders had subsequently submitted applications to ESRC, and over a quarter had submitted applications to governmental funding bodies and charities. In addition, several award-holders had submitted applications to other research councils. With the exception of applications to EPSRC, MRC and NERC, the Small Grant award-holders were usually lead applicants on these applications.

Many of the efforts to obtain research funding were successful. Of those that had tried to obtain funding, nearly 80 percent had been successful in doing so (Table 8). Small Grant award-holders of earlier years had more frequently obtained research funding after completing their ESRC project²². It was most common that they had been awarded funding from ESRC, followed by governmental funding bodies and charities. Again, with the exception of applications to EPSRC, MRC and NERC, the Small Grants award-holders were usually principal investigator on these grants.

Table 8: Have you been an applicant for/successfully obtained any other research grants since awarded the ESRC Small Grants? (total across years)

	Applied for grants (N=332)		Obtained grants (N=257)	
	n	%	n	%
No	73	22.0	53	20.6
Yes	259	78.0	204	79.4
applied to/funded by...				
...ESRC	204	61.4	129	50.2
...AHRC	29	8.7	17	6.6
...BBSRC	11	3.3	4	1.6
...EPSRC	17	5.1	10	3.9
...MRC	14	4.2	6	2.3
...NERC	4	1.2	3	1.2
...governmental funding body	90	27.1	70	27.2
...charity	96	28.9	65	25.3

These applications and awards may or may not build on research conducted as part of the Small Grants project. Three out of four award-holders (76%) stated that they have subsequently further developed the research studied in their Small Grants project. There seems to be common also amongst award-holders that had completed their project in recent years and there was a tendency suggesting that this is more common amongst award-holders classifying their project as a 'pilot project, testing an idea, methodological development, etc.' (87% compared to 74% for other classifications²³).

Most respondents stated that their Small Grants project resulted in several publications and presentations (Table 9). On average, the projects were disseminated in 4 publications and 4.5 presentations. It is possible that this figure is higher than the 'official' ESRC figures discussed earlier due to a potential skew in the sample or possibly the ESRC database not being as up-to-date as the survey findings on this subject matter. Respondents reported that presentations at academic conferences were the most common form of dissemination (with an average of 3.6 presentations per project) followed by articles in academic journals (2.1 per project). There was less dissemination to non-academic audiences, although 27 percent of the projects resulted in publications and 32 percent in presentations targeted at non-academics. However, it should be noted that 8 percent of all projects had not lead to any publications and 12 percent had not led to any presentations. There was an overlap between these two groups of projects with 2 percent of the award-holders not reporting any form of dissemination of their project.

A significantly higher number of publications was produced from projects completed in 2000 and 2001 than projects completed in 2004 and 2005²⁴, with the exception of academic research reports²⁵. There was no difference between the periods in terms of presentations²⁶. This suggests that academic research reports and presentations are made during or soon after the completion of the project. Furthermore, there was a tendency for less experienced award-holders (here measured as previously having held an ESRC grant) to produce more research output²⁷, with significantly more research output targeted at an academic audience²⁸. There was no significant difference between projects classified as 'pilot work, testing an idea, methodological development etc.' and other projects²⁹.

Table 9: How many publications (published and accepted for publication) and presentations derived from the Small Grants project? (by year) (N=314)

	2000		2001		2004		2005	
	Average no.	Min, max						
Articles in academic journals	2.28	0, 7	3.45	0, 35	1.93	0, 7	1.43	0, 7
Academic books	0.35	0, 3	0.38	0, 3	0.15	0, 2	0.23	0, 7
Academic book chapters	0.69	0, 5	1.00	0, 5	0.36	0, 5	0.36	0, 5
Academic research reports	0.30	0, 3	0.35	0, 3	0.26	0, 2	0.54	0, 4
Non-academic publications	0.52	0, 12	0.54	0, 7	1.04	0, 20	0.72	0, 20
Presentations at academic conferences/seminars	3.63	0, 15	4.12	0, 23	3.51	0, 12	3.43	0, 10
Presentations at non-academic conferences/seminars	1.22	0, 16	0.81	0, 8	0.71	0, 8	0.83	0, 10

Note: Outliers were checked in Internet-based study. Although data is genuine, some award-holders seem to have been liberal in their interpretation of this question.

To the knowledge of the award-holders, there had been media coverage of 35 percent of the Small Grants projects. Most commonly, this was done in the form of newspaper reports (29%), followed by radio reports (16%) and television reports (7%). There was no clear difference between projects completed in different years, suggesting that media coverage takes place during or soon after research has been conducted. Some of these projects were covered in a large number of reports.

Box 1: Dissemination activities and career impact

Case A: Doctor A worked in information studies and had been a researcher for around five years before being successful with a Small Grant application in 2001. Doctor A had subsequently received additional funding from the European Social Fund to further develop work in the same area. At the time of the survey, s/he worked at a significantly higher staff grade at the same institution with greater autonomy and time to work on research. Doctor A believed that the grant had extended his/her national and international research networks and made it easier to have papers accepted at conferences and for publication. Moreover, the ESRC funded research has influenced information and communication practice in parliamentary services. Doctor A believed that the Small Grant was a contributory factor in both personal career terms and in enhancing the profile of the institution:

I regard the grant as having a seminal impact on my career. It was the first ESRC grant awarded to my institution and demonstrated to others that this was possible. Several others have now made successful applications.

Case B: Professor B worked in a Business School and had little research experience prior to receiving the Small Grant. The grant, which was completed in 2004, had a very significant impact on his/her autonomy and independence in research, in networking, publishing and ability to obtain further funding. When responding to the questionnaire, Professor B worked at a significantly higher staff grade at the same institution and the grant had been a contributory factor in this promotion. In disseminating the research findings, Professor B had single-authored one, and joint-authored four, articles in academic journals, had produced three book chapters and presented at four academic conferences. Professor B had subsequently received further funding from the ESRC and written more articles for publication extending the model empirically and conceptually. The model developed as a result of the SGS funding was used by advisors in the sector.

Case C: Doctor C was an historian who had less than three years experience prior to receiving a Small Grant. The project was completed in 2005. Since then, Doctor C had moved from a temporary research post to a permanent lecturing post at a different institution and believed that the grant had contributed to this career development. Doctor C had produced one single-authored article in an academic journal and had presented findings at six conferences and seminars. Doctor C believed that the award of the Small Grant had led to greater autonomy and independence and freed up more time for research, and had also had a positive impact on developing research contacts in the UK and abroad, and on gaining acceptance for conference papers and publications. Doctor C believed that the Small Grant Scheme was useful for relatively junior researchers, because: 'It is a good way to get experience and not too complicated'.

Another way of looking at outcomes of research projects is to see to what extent their findings have informed policy and practice. To the knowledge of the award-holders, research findings from 27 percent of the Small Grants projects had been used by policy-makers and findings from 38 percent of the projects had been used by practitioners. In open comments, respondents detailed that project findings had been used by, for example, government department and agencies,

local councils, unions, and non-governmental organisations. Findings had also been used by foreign governments and organisations, and by international bodies such as the European Parliament, the European Council, the European Central Bank, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the World Bank, the United Nation Economic Commission for Europe and the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA). Furthermore, findings had informed public debate and been used by a wide variety of practitioners. Dissemination activities of Small Grants projects and their career impact are illustrated by three cases presented in Box 1.

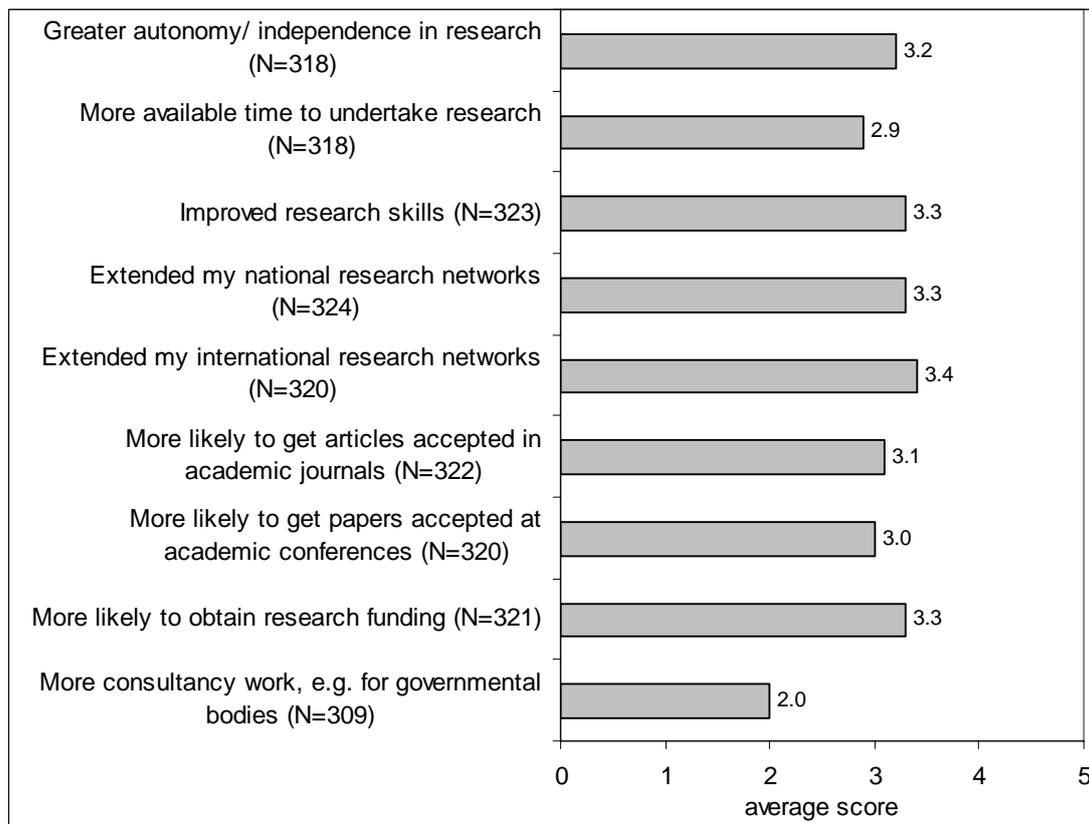
In addition to this, six award-holders (2%) had received an award for the research they conducted as part of their Small Grants project (Table 10).

Table 10: Awards received by Small Grant award-holders

Award	Awarding body	Year	Type of award
Alec Nove Prize	British Association of Slavic and East European Studies	2005	Prize for Best Book of the Year Published in Russian, Soviet and post-Soviet Studies
Emerald Award for Excellence		2005	Outstanding Paper Award
Heinemann Award	Royal Society of Literature	2000	Prize
Paper of the Year in Gifted Child Quarterly	National Association for Gifted Education	2004	
Politics Book of the Year Award	UK Political Studies Association	2003	Prize
Spearman Medal	British Psychological Society	2004	Medal

The award-holders were asked to give their view on the extent to which the Small Grant had had an impact on a number of factors of their career (specified in Figure 16). On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 stands for 'no significant impact' and 5 for 'very significant impact', most factors received an average score of just over 3.

Figure 16: To what extent did the Small Grants have an impact on the following factors in your career? (total across years)



Worth noticing is that more than half of the award-holders gave the following factors a score of 4 or 5:

- Greater autonomy/independence in research
- Extended my national research networks
- Extended my international research networks
- More likely to obtain research funding.

Between 40 and 50 percent of the award-holders gave the following factors a score of 4 or 5:

- More available time to undertake research
- Improved research skills
- More likely to get articles accepted in academic journals
- More likely to get papers accepted at academic conferences.

Box 2: End-of-award grade and carer impact

Case D: Professor D's Small Grant in the discipline of linguistics was graded as 'problematic' in 2001. The professor was a seasoned researcher who had worked in the field for over 12 years when awarded the Small Grant, and had previously held both an ESRC Standard Grant and a Small Grant. The 'problematic' nature of the project did not significantly affect the number of outputs delivered from the project, there being a total of four publications and six presentations. Nor did the 'problematic' grading affect the impact on the professor's career, which is now at a 'significantly higher level' than before being awarded the grant. In fact, the Small Grant was cited as a 'contributory factor' to this higher grading. The most significant areas of impact of the Small Grant for Professor D were that s/he found it easier to get articles published in academic journals and to get papers accepted at conferences.

Case E: Doctor E completed an ESRC Small Grant in 2004 within the discipline of psychology and was awarded an outstanding end-of-award grade. Doctor E had worked in academic research for less than three years when awarded the Small Grant and this was his/her first application to the ESRC. Doctor E believed that the Small Grant had a significant impact upon his/her career and had enabled greater autonomy/independence in research, more time to undertake research, improved research skills, an extension of national and international networks as well as an increased likelihood of getting academic papers published, conference papers accepted and obtaining research funding. Doctor E had successfully disseminated the results from the Small Grant award, including three presentations and seven publications. Doctor E still worked at the same grade as when awarded the grant.

Case F: Professor F was awarded an outstanding end-of-award grade in 2005, after completing a Small Grant research project in the discipline of economics. Prior to the Small Grant, the professor had between four and eight years research experience and had applied successfully to the ESRC before. At the time of the survey, Professor F was working at the same pay level as before receiving the grant. Impact of the research grant had revolved around greater autonomy/independence in research and the increased likelihood of having journal articles or conference papers accepted as well as the improved prospects of obtaining research funding. Professor F had presented seven conference papers and published five articles as a result of the Small Grant research and was continuing research in this particular area.

Case G: Doctor G undertook a Small Grant project within Sociology and was given a problematic end-of-award grade in 2005. When receiving the grant, s/he had worked in research for between four and eight years, although this was his/her first application to, and grant from, the ESRC. Doctor G was currently working at the same level as when awarded the grant. Doctor G did not believe that the Small Grant impacted significantly on any aspect of his/her career, although s/he had published three articles and given four presentations as a result of this project. Doctor G did not feel that the project was problematic as such but rather it ran out of time to complete within the specified timetable. Doctor G was currently developing a more robust follow-up to the project.

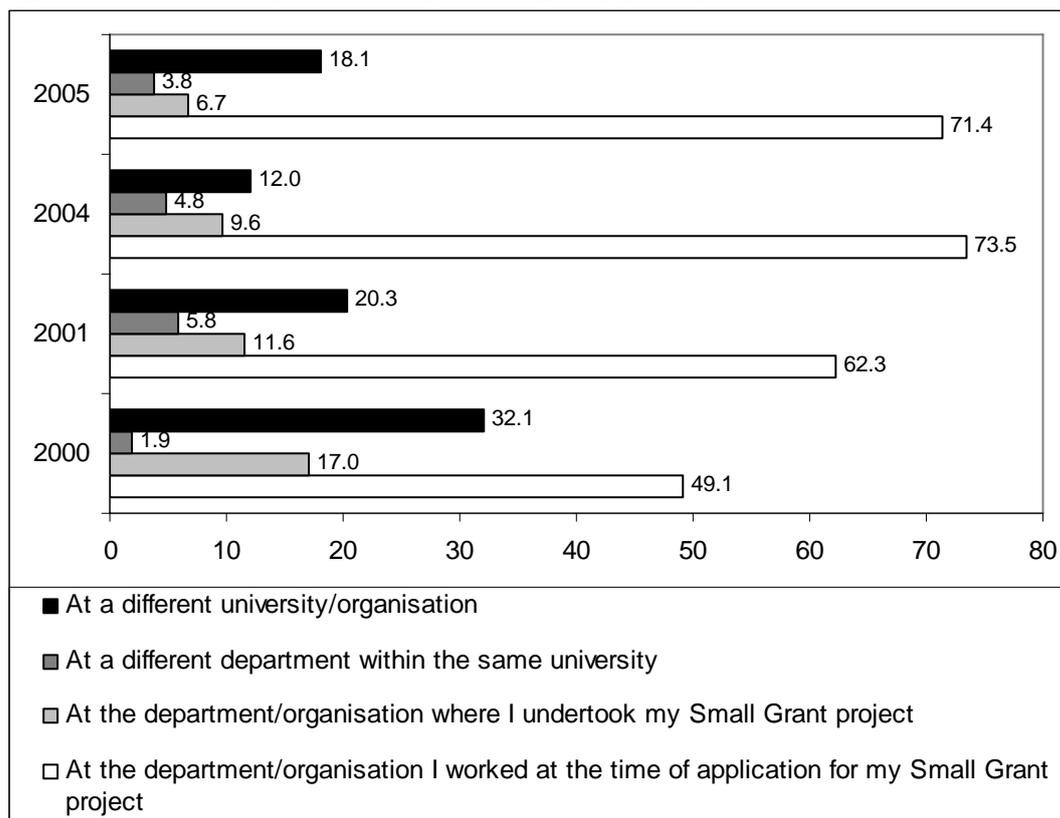
Only one factor, 'More consultancy work, e.g., for governmental bodies', was regarded as less significant for their careers with 15 percent of the award-holders

giving it a score of 4 or 5. Award-holders who had never held an ESRC grant before generally thought that the Small Grant had a greater impact on their career³⁰ than those that had previously held an ESRC grant³¹. There were no clear differences between award-holders that had just completed their project and those that had completed their project a few years ago. In Box 2, the issue of impact on award-holders careers is linked to end-of-award grades in a four illustrative cases.

So, how had the career developed for the award-holders? Most of them (77%) were doing the same main type of work today as they did at the time of the application: 33 percent were mostly doing research at the time of application and today; 22 percent were mostly doing teaching at both times; and 22 percent had a more mixed academic role. The main movement had been towards research (10%), mainly for people that previously had a work role dominated by teaching (6%).

There was an even higher stability in the sector in which the award-holders worked. Most of them (94%) worked at a university at both times. Very few award-holders worked at non-university-based research centre at both times (2%) or had moved between sectors (5%). Most of them actually worked in the same department/organisation as when they submitted their application for a Small Grant. A greater proportion of the award-holders that completed their Small Grants project in 2000 and 2001 had moved to a different university or organisation (Figure 17).

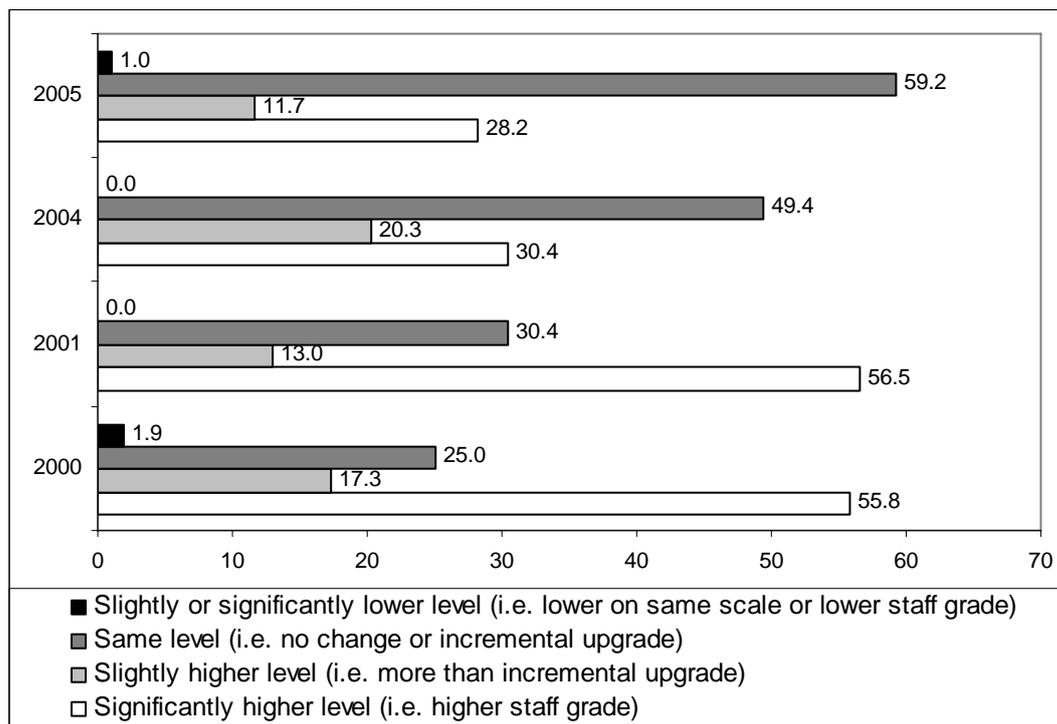
Figure 17: Where are you currently working? (by year) (N=310)



Those that held a different post than they did when undertaking the Small Grants project were asked whether they thought that the grant had helped them to get their current post. More than half of them (55%) thought that it was a contributory factor, while some (3%) thought that it was the main reason. Another 29 percent did not think that it helped them get the current post and 13 percent did not know.

The greatest career enhancement seems to have taken place regarding the award-holders' position. Many of them have been upgraded to a higher (15%) or significantly higher (40%) position, although many (44%) were on the same level as they were before they undertook their Small Grants project. More than half of the award-holders that completed their project in 2000 or 2001 had a significantly higher position today (Figure 18). This was more common amongst award-holders that had not previously held an ESRC grant³². So, to what extent did the Small Grant help them in achieving a higher position? The majority of them (75%) thought that the Small Grant was a contributing factor for getting the higher position, while a few (4%) thought that it was the main reason for getting this position. Another 13 percent thought that the grant did not help them in getting the position and 8 percent did not know.

Figure 18: At what level is your current position, compared with the position you had before the Small Grants project? (by year) (N=303)



Two other indicators of career development are length and mode of contract. Again, most award-holders had not experienced any major changes from the time of application. Seventy-eight percent of the award-holders had the same length of contract at both times with 75 percent having a permanent contract at both times. The greatest development between the years was that 15 percent of the award-holders moved from temporary to permanent contracts. Regarding the mode of contract, the situation was unchanged for 91 percent of the award-holders with 89 percent of them working full-time at both at the time of the application and today.

Similarly, almost all of the award-holders (98%) had the same highest qualification at the time of the application and today. The predominant qualification was to have a PhD or equivalent (91%). Only 2 percent of the award-holders had received a higher qualification since the time of the application.

Past and present Grants Board members' perspective

All Board members agreed that the impact of a Small Grant on junior researchers can be substantial and that 'a successful project is very important to the career development of young researchers'. For experienced researchers it means that

you 'get to do the project that you want to do' and furthermore, research income of any kind is always welcome within universities. In addition, there is kudos to receiving ESRC funding and ESRC itself is regarded as a 'kite mark'.

Virtual College member's perspective

There was strong support for the Small Grants Scheme amongst Virtual College members. It was seen as valuable and important. The impact of the Scheme was generally seen as positive as it allows for quality research to be funded quickly, and it was argued that 'small and inexpensive projects are as important as large expensive ones'. As one member said: 'despite being "small", a small grant can make a considerable difference by allowing time for field work, research assistance or some writing-up time'. Like any other scheme, the impact of the Small Grants Scheme depends on the timeliness and quality of projects funded and on how successful the grant-holder is in undertaking and disseminating the research.

Another benefit of the Scheme is that it holds out to all social scientists the possibility of applying for research funding. It was pointed out that there are not many other sources of small grants. Without this scheme, one member argued, a lot of people might write off research activity altogether. This, he continued, would have dire consequences as some of the best research is unfunded and 'done in the hope that one day one's ship may come in'.

Learned societies' perspective

Similarly, one learned society representative argued that the Small Grants Scheme is a 'vitaly important source of funding' and that, in the UK, there are very few sources of money aimed at academic research in social science. This respondent concluded: 'We need the ESRC fund. It is particularly important because it is not very large'.

The other learned society representative thought that the Scheme is valuable as 'a means to fund individual and targeted research' and that it is especially important to have peer review within reasonably short timescales. This respondent believed that, in general, Small Grants are given to people who benefit the most from them. However, she added that 'ESRC might wish to consider the new research grant programmes that seem to be a greater feature of the funding arrangements for other funding councils', a remark that might seem surprising considering the recent introduction of the First Grants Scheme.

Research managers and support officers' perspective

Research managers and support officers were more concerned with the impact on departments and institutions than on individuals. Nevertheless, they reported that there does seem to be a growing positive impact, especially for junior academics. Research managers and officers also noted that the impact on the community itself is greater than on departments, because work gets funded that would otherwise not.

Summary

This evaluation shows that, in general, Small Grants award-holders were successful in producing outputs with an average of 4 publications and 4.5 presentations per project. Official ESRC statistics suggest that there were fewer outputs from Small Grants than from Standard Grants, which might not be surprising considering that Small Grants projects receive smaller amounts of funding and run over shorter periods. It should be noted, though, that the official ESRC statistics include fewer outputs per project, which may be due to a potential skew in the survey sample or that the ESRC database is not up-to-date. A third of the Small Grants projects had been covered in media reports, a quarter used by policy-makers, and more than a third used by practitioners.

The Scheme was also widely regarded as having an impact on the career of the award-holders and on the research community. It was seen as especially important for junior academics but nevertheless allowing time for research by academics at all levels. Fifty-five percent of the award-holders had been upgraded to higher positions and many of them thought that their Small Grants award had contributed to this. The Scheme was also seen as a contributory factor for getting a new post and as significant for a number of other career factors, for example, greater autonomy/independence in research, research networks, and likelihood of obtaining research funding. Small Grants made a particularly strong impact on the career of award-holders who had not previously held an ESRC grant.

All in all, we find the Scheme successful and think that it has a positive impact on both the social science research community and the careers of individual academics. This is reflected in a strong support for the Scheme across different groups within the research community. To ensure future success, we think that it is important to make continuous improvements as response both to the changing

landscape of research funding and to matters identified by this evaluation and addressed in previous sections of the report.

Review of similar schemes by other funding organisations

In this review, five other Small Grants Schemes were identified, along with several new researcher awards for those early in their research careers. While several schemes share the scope and intention of the ESRC scheme, none are similar enough in both scope and scale to make useful comparisons.

Research Councils

The Natural Environment Research Council

The Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) 'delivers independent research, survey, training and knowledge transfer in the environmental sciences, to advance knowledge of planet Earth as a complex, interacting system'. It operates a Small Grants Scheme on a similar basis to ESRC's Scheme in the sense that it is designed for 'curiosity-motivated basic, strategic or applied research, providing funding for small discrete projects, proof-of-concept studies, pump-priming exercises, etc'. However, the maximum funding that can be applied for is £25,000. As with the ESRC, funding decisions are subject to assessment by College members with final funding recommendations being agreed by a moderating panel that includes peer review college members.

Arts and Humanities Research Council

The Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) supports research across a broad range of traditional humanities subjects, such as history, modern languages and English literature, and the creative and performing arts. However, its small grants scheme is specific to the creative and performing arts. Its scope is similar to other small grants schemes as funding is intended to 'pursue well-defined small-scale projects, or parts of larger projects, that are likely to bring advances in creativity, insights, knowledge or understanding of interest and value both to the research community and to a wider public'.

The Scheme has recently doubled its maximum grant from £10,000 to £20,000 (at full economic costing) over a maximum of 12 months. Although applicants to this Scheme are relatively successful (a 52% success rate), the Scheme only accounts for 0.88% of AHRC spending³³.

Medical Research Council

The Medical Research Council (MRC) offers a variation on a small grants scheme, although its Trial Grants Scheme for Clinical Trials, 'designed to provide high-quality evidence on the efficacy and effectiveness of interventions in medicine and the health services', is not directly comparable to the ESRC Small Grants Scheme. It is thematically similar to the ESRC and NERC small grants schemes in that the focus is mainly on trials that 'break new ground in terms of research questions or methodologies, or that add significantly to our understanding of biological or behavioural mechanisms and processes in human health and healthcare'³⁴. However, unlike the ESRC and NERC schemes, this funding is not specifically for small-scale research projects. There is no upper limit on costs, trial grants can run for several years, and the application process is normally 12–14 months. As clinical trials, they are more limited in scope than full MRC Research and Collaboration Grants, whereas ESRC and NERC Small Grants can be seen as different mainly in scale to Standard Grants.

Other publicly funded bodies

The British Academy

The British Academy, established by Royal Charter in 1902, is the national academy for the humanities and the social sciences. Primarily an independent, self-governing fellowship of more than 800 scholars, the Academy also disburses grants funded by the Office of Science and Innovation (OSI). The maximum Small Research Grant (currently exempt from full economic costing) is £7,500 over two years and awards are to support primary research in the humanities and social sciences.

However, unlike ESRC and NERC small grants, they are not designed to fund discrete projects. Instead they are designed 'to facilitate initial project planning and development; to support the direct costs of research; and to enable the advancement of research through workshops, or visits by or to partner scholars' or any combination of these activities 'which will have an identifiable outcome on completion of the Academy-funded component' of the project of which they are supportive.³⁵

Charities

The Nuffield Foundation

Among the registered charitable foundations surveyed, only the Nuffield Foundation offers a small grants scheme. This Scheme makes grants for social

science research expenses and funds self-contained projects or pilot studies that add to the 'advancement of social well-being'.

However, awards are aimed primarily at those new to social science research and are normally limited to £7,500 (with exceptional awards up to a maximum of £12,000). In 2004–05 the foundation made 71 small grants for social science research totalling £480,505 which is approximately 8.5% of total awards.³⁶

Summary

The ESRC Small Grants Scheme is one of a number of schemes that fund both discrete projects and exploratory or pilot research. However, while other schemes may be similar in scope, the ESRC scheme is unique in the scale of awards. The only other research council that supports projects of a similar magnitude is the MRC, but their Trial Grants have a more limited scope.

For this reason, we do not think that the Scheme would benefit from adopting practices and processes used in other small grants scheme. Instead, it would benefit from adopting some of the practices used in full grants schemes, such as that of the EPSRC. As indicated in previous sections of this report, this could include raising awareness of the Scheme through a programme of visits to universities and a stronger emphasis on liaison with local research managers, and by offering training for assessors in the workings of the assessment process.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

This evaluation shows that the ESRC Small Grants Scheme receives strong support amongst various groups and that it functions well overall. It is a unique scheme; no other funding organisation offers any comparable funding opportunity for social scientists. Still, a number of improvements can be made. Here, key findings of the evaluation are discussed and suggestions are made for further development of the Scheme.

Purpose and profile of the Scheme

There was consensus amongst Board members, College members and research managers/support officers that the Scheme should be open and responsive, aimed at low-cost projects and have quick turnarounds. This seems to be functioning well and we see no reason for this to be reconsidered.

Nevertheless, this evaluation reveals a confusion regarding the purpose of the Scheme: both whom it is aimed at and the level of risk-taking. It is stated on ESRC's website that the Scheme is particularly suitable for junior researchers and while this was promoted by both Board members, research managers/support officers, and some College members, the general opinion amongst College members was that the Scheme should be open also for senior academics. There is not necessarily a contradiction in these two views but as the target group is of great importance to a research grant scheme, we think that clarifications are necessary. Otherwise, the Scheme may suffer from not receiving applications from people who think that they, or their project, are not eligible for it. Board members reported that they do not generally have policy discussions. However, the purpose and profile of the Scheme are essential policy issues and key decisions need to be made.

Recommendation 1:

Given the confusion regarding the target group of the Scheme and in the light of the recently introduced First Grants Scheme, we recommend that the Board to clarify the purpose of the Scheme and the Scheme's target groups. This decision should take other views reflected in this evaluation into account. Thereafter, clear instructions should be communicated with the Virtual College and information posted on the ESRC website. In relation to

the introduction of the First Grants Scheme, it would seem that there is no need to promote the Small Grants Scheme exclusively as a vehicle for less experienced researchers.

The issue of risk-taking in decisions to award grants is linked to the issue of seniority but also to the level of support for innovative or risky ideas. There is a disagreement between different groups about how much risk-taking the Scheme should accommodate. The Scheme and its assessment process were often described as conservative, especially by college members and research managers/support officers. On the other hand, Board members were critical of College assessors. Our impression is that the Scheme accommodates only a low level of risk-taking: 14 percent of surveyed award-holders classified their project as 'pilot work, testing an idea, methodological development, etc.', 90 percent of the projects were graded as good or outstanding at the end of award, and 76 percent of the award-holders had further developed the research topic(s) studied in the project after completing their project.

Furthermore, it should be noted that current consideration of prior track record in the review process means that junior academics are disadvantaged. Even though the Small Grants Scheme is more inclusive than the Standard Grants Scheme, the success rate is higher for professors than more junior applicants and over the years there is a tendency to award an increasing proportion of Small Grants to more experienced applicants (that is, applicants who previously worked on an ESRC project). We think that this is unfortunate, especially since this evaluation shows that junior academics tend to achieve more research outputs and that Small Grants have more impact on their career than on the career of senior academics.

Recommendation 2:

We recommend a Board discussion on, and clarification of, the policy on risk-taking within the Small Grants Scheme, and that this discussion either directly involve the Virtual College or that the outcome is communicated to the College. Although it is essential for the Scheme to encompass self-contained projects, we think that there is an opportunity for the Small Grants Scheme to embrace a wider range and type of projects from a wider set of applicants. It appears that there is a *de facto* tendency for 'track record' to outweigh other factors in assessing applications and that 'risk-taking' might be extended to:

- a) supporting high quality applications even if the applicants do not have a good track record in research;
 - b) supporting projects with non-standard or non-traditional methodological elements;
 - c) be a vehicle to test out ideas prior to application for a Standard Grant.
- In relation to this, we think that ESRC could be more pro-active in encouraging larger research applications from people who have successfully completed a Small Grants project.

Even though the Small Grants Scheme is more inclusive than the Standard Grants Scheme, the evaluation confirms that applicants from post-1992 universities were less successful in obtaining funding. The majority of award-holders worked in a department/school that had received ESRC grants within the last five years, over half of them had previously held an ESRC grant, and a third of them had worked on an ESRC project without being a grant-holder prior to their application. Our interpretation of these findings is that there may be lack of support and experience within certain institutions. In addition to inequalities regarding seniority and institutional background, some disciplines were more successful than other disciplines in obtaining Small Grants. We think that the issue of varying success rates amongst different groups of academics needs to be addressed. However, high-quality applications should be supported and we do not recommend an introduction of quotas for certain groups of academics.

Recommendation 3:

We recommend that ESRC support less successful groups by providing them with more information about funding opportunities and the application process. This can be done, for example, in seminars and workshops, and via more communication and collaboration with research managers.

Operation of the Scheme

The evaluation shows that the Scheme operates well overall. The process is streamlined and award-holders were generally satisfied with the application process and with ESRC's management/administration of their grant. Nevertheless, improvements can be made. If the application process is seen as time-consuming and the assessment process as non-transparent, this would prevent people from submitting applications.

Recommendation 4:

We recommend the following improvements to the application form:

- a) make the form simpler with less repetition of information given in the proposal;
- b) enable the form to be saved in other formats, for example, as a text file or in Excel;
- c) make the Je-S help larger on the screen and categorise it by research council type;
- d) make it easier to see all resources information in one place on the form;
- e) provide a sample form;
- f) give clearer information on who to contact for support.

The assessment process is crucial for the success of the Small Grants Scheme. Improvements can be made to ensure the quality of the assessment process.

Recommendation 5:

We recommended that ESRC:

- a) ensure that applications are sent to College assessors with expertise in the area or, if there is no assessor with relevant expertise, ask a College member to nominate an external assessor;
- b) provide training for College members as most of them are not likely to assess more than a few applications per year;
- c) ensure that funding decisions are always fed back to College assessors;
- d) develop a checklist of standard problems with applications to avoid assessors writing long comments on poor applications, giving them more time to write supportive comments on promising applications;
- e) clarify instructions regarding assessment comments, that is, whether comments are required and what they should cover;
- f) review the process of reconsideration of applications when there are disagreements between the assessors, so that both Board assessor and College assessor are involved in reassessing the application, even though this might mean a longer turnaround time.

In addition to this, a number of further changes can be made to improve the operation of the Scheme. One of them has to do with the fact that, currently,

money cannot be spent beyond the award end date, something that has implications particularly for dissemination activities.

Recommendation 6:

We recommend that ESRC looks into changing this matter or clarify the information on this in its application guidelines.

Another potential change to the operation of the Scheme is related to the end-of-award grading, which met with criticism by Board members. This grading is simplistic in that it does not reflect the multifaceted characteristic of research outcome and impact. The grading is further complicated by the fact that there is a delay in getting research outputs published, which is particularly problematic in the evaluation of short projects.

Recommendation 7:

We recommend that ESRC undertakes a review of the purpose and system of end-of-award grading. Projects should be evaluated against their aims and targets and, considering the length and size of projects funded within the Small Grants Scheme, we suggest that less emphasis should be placed on research outputs.

A more general observation is that the evaluation identified confusion or lack of clarity in several areas, such as target group of the Scheme and the assessment process, suggesting that there might be a need for better communication about the purpose and operation of the Scheme. Unclear information and lack of transparency in how the Small Grants Scheme is run have implications for both its outreach and credibility.

Recommendation 8:

Consequently, we recommend that ESRC take actions to improve communication about the Scheme between the Board and the Virtual College, and between ESRC and the research community. This could be inspired by processes applied by other research councils, such as the EPSRC, which runs programmes of visits to universities and liaison with local research managers.

A final point on the operation of the Scheme relates to its success rate. In 2004/2005, 36 percent of all applications submitted to the Small Grants Scheme

were funded. By comparison, the success rate for the Standard Grants Scheme was 19 percent. Forty-one percent of all Alpha graded applications were funded, compared to 23 percent for the Standard Grants Scheme. This difference in success rates between the two schemes might be an issue for the Board to reflect further upon.

Impact of the Scheme

All in all, we find the Small Grants Scheme successful, and we think that it has a positive impact on both the social science research community and the careers of individual academics. In general, Small Grants award-holders were successful in producing research outputs, receiving media publicity, and being used by policy-makers and practitioners. Even though official ESRC statistics suggest that there were fewer outputs from Small Grants than from Standard Grants, this might not be surprising considering that Small Grants projects receive smaller amounts of funding and run over shorter periods. Here, it should be noted that comparisons between the schemes are based on official ESRC statistics which include fewer outputs per project than the survey (which may be due to a potential skew in the survey sample or that the ESRC database is not up-to-date). The Small Grants Scheme was also widely regarded as having an impact on the career of the award-holders and on the research community. It was seen as especially important for junior academics but nevertheless allowing time for research by academics at all levels.

The success of the Scheme is reflected in a strong support for the Scheme across different groups within the research community. To ensure future success, we believe that it is crucial to make continuous improvements – as response both to the changing landscape of research funding, and to matters identified by this evaluation and addressed above.

END NOTES

¹ Research Councils surveyed include all research councils to which surveyed award-holders have submitted applications. These were: the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC), the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC), the Medical Research Council (MRC), the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC), and the Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council (PPARC).

² Other publicly funding bodies surveyed were: the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA) described as an independent public endowment; the British Academy (BA), which, although an independent fellowship, disburses grants funded by the Office of Science and Innovation (OSI); and the Big Lottery Fund (formerly called the Community Fund) which disburses funds raised by the National Lottery.

³ The third category of institutions was registered charities, represented here by the Nuffield Foundation, the Leverhulme Trust (LT) and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF).

⁴ ESRC's websites www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/opportunities/current%5Ffunding%5Fopportunities, www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/opportunities/current_funding_opportunities/research/index20.aspx?ComponentId=7915&SourcePageId=15289 and www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/opportunities/current_funding_opportunities/research/index.aspx?ComponentId=11696&SourcePageId=5964. Accessed 11 September 2006.

⁵ *Review of ESRC Virtual College System*. Report prepared by Jeremy Neathey, March 2002. Also note that another review of the Virtual College, undertaken by Liz Rushbrook, is currently underway.

⁶ ESRC's website www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/opportunities/current_funding_opportunities/research/index20.aspx?ComponentId=7915&SourcePageId=15289 accessed 11 September 2006.

⁷ Research Grants Board meetings at 16 January 2004, 1–2 April 2004, 2 July 2004, 8 October 2004, 21 January 2005, 22 April 2005, July 2005, October 2005, 20 January 2006.

⁸ Research Grants Board meeting at 16 January 2004.

⁹ Research Grants Board meeting in October 2005.

¹⁰ Research Grants Board meetings at 16 January 2004, 1–2 April 2004, 2 July 2004, 8 October 2004, 21 January 2005, 22 April 2005, July 2005, October 2005, 20 January 2006.

¹¹ *Research Grants Board Annual Report 2004/2005*. Report prepared by Margaret Foster. These are the most recent figures as the *2005–06 Annual Report and Accounts* does differentiate between Small and Standard Grants.

¹² ESRC's website www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/opportunities/current_funding_opportunities/research/index20.aspx?ComponentId=7915&SourcePageId=15289 accessed 11 September 2006.

¹³ *Research Grants Board Annual Report 2004/2005*. Report prepared by Margaret Foster.

¹⁴ *Review of ESRC Virtual College System*. Report prepared by Jeremy Neathey, March 2002.

¹⁵ Form: Jonckheere-Terpstra $z=1.819$, $p=0.069$; guidelines: $z=1.170$, $p=0.242$; staff support: $z=0.453$, $p=0.651$.

¹⁶ Efficiency: Jonckheere-Terpstra $z=4.119$, $p<0.001$, $r=0.23$; flexibility: $z=4.129$, $p<0.001$, $r=0.23$.

¹⁷ $\tau=0.094$, $p=0.066$.

¹⁸ $\tau=0.119$, $p=0.018$.

¹⁹ 2005 Research Evaluation Committee Report.

²⁰ $r_s=0.088$, $p=0.003$ (since 1994).

²¹ $\chi=15.798$, $p<0.001$.

²² $\chi=3.534$, $p=0.060$.

²³ $\chi=2.823$, $p=0.093$.

²⁴ $U=8849$, $p<0.001$, $r=0.21$.

²⁵ $U=11507$, $p=0.698$.

²⁶ $U=11480$, $p=0.733$.

²⁷ $U=10550$, $p=0.092$, $r=0.10$.

²⁸ $U=10146$, $p=0.028$, $r=0.13$.

²⁹ $U=5799$, $p=0.498$.

³⁰ Overall impact was determined by summing scores on nine individual items that assessed Small Grants' impact on the career of award-holders, as specified in Figure 16 (Cronbach's Alpha: 0.850).

³¹ $U=6931$, $p<0.001$, $r=0.23$.

³² $r_s=0.162$, $p=0.004$.

³³ AHRC (2006) Annual Report and Accounts 2005–06 www.ahrc.ac.uk/ahrb/website/images/4_98435.pdf. Accessed August 2006.

³⁴ MRC (2005) Medical Research Council; Annual Report and Accounts 2004/05 www.mrc.ac.uk/pdf-annual_report_2004_2005.pdf. Accessed August 2006.

³⁵ British Academy Research Funding website www.britac.ac.uk/funding/guide/srg.html. Accessed August 2006

³⁶ Nuffield Foundation (2006) Report and Financial Statements: Year Ending 31st December 2005 www.nuffieldfoundation.org/fileLibrary/pdf/Report_and_Accounts_2005a.pdf. Accessed August 2006.