



**Evaluation of the ESRC's Participation in European Collaborative
Research Projects (ECRPs)**

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Evaluation Committee

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Executive Summary

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Introduction and background

The European Collaborative Research Project (ECRP) scheme was established in 2001 to promote investigator-driven, multinational collaborative research in the social sciences in Europe and beyond. This report evaluates the ESRC's participation in the ECRP between 2001 and 2011.

Evaluation aims and approach

The evaluation aims were to assess:

- the contribution to UK social science research made by the ESRC supported European Collaborative Research Projects
- the scientific quality and academic impact of the ESRC-funded research supported through the ECRP, and any lessons learned regarding maximising these attributes
- the extent to which international networks were fostered
- the extent to which the investment has had an impact upon policy and practice and any lessons learned regarding maximising the non-academic impact of research
- the relative merits of the ECRP funding mechanism as an avenue for international collaborative funding, providing guidance on future international collaborative funding priorities for the ESRC.

The research has been based on a review of the end of project reports and rapporteurs comments for each funded project, interviews with each of the UK principal investigators, and e-surveys of European research partners and UK policy beneficiaries.

Programme overview

Application procedures and project award decisions

The ESRC was a partner in the ECRP over a nine year period, between 2001 and 2010. Under the scheme, each of the national partners issued their own call for proposals at the start of the calendar year, scored these using their own, single stage application form, and made their own decision as to which projects to support. Only collaborative projects that were approved in three or more European nations were allowed to proceed.

Funding committed and levered

The ESRC allocated €4.483 million towards 19 ECRP funded projects between 2001 and 2011, This led to a leveraging of over €19.645 million of additional funding for European partner projects from other ESF member bodies.

Academic and scientific quality of research outputs

Each of the 12 projects that have been completed and peer reviewed to date received ratings of either 'good', 'very good' or 'outstanding' from all three of their rapporteurs, with one rated as 'outstanding' by all three reviewers.

Consultation findings

Rationale and objectives

The ECRP addressed a number of market failures in the field of research funding, allowing research to take place in areas that would not receive funding otherwise, including research based upon data from different countries or linguistic areas, and international comparative research. The ECRP helps Europe to achieve critical mass in the delivery of high quality research based on leading expertise, thus helping it to compete on a more even footing with the US research base.

Selection of partners

While the programme rarely produced new relationships between researchers, it did lead to a strengthening of existing relationships, and gave researchers an opportunity to work together more closely than they would have done otherwise.

Process review

The ESRC has adopted an application process and funding model which is consistent with all other ESRC funded research, and is considered transparent, fair and easy to understand. While a minority of respondents have concerns about the speed of the selection process and the process of notifying people about the scheme, these are also well regarded by most researchers.

In line with ESF guidance, the ESRC's partner organisations follow a similar application process to the ESRC, and these are also well regarded by local researchers.

However, while each research council follows the same research **processes**, differences still exist between the research **forms** used, and there are concerns around the international co-ordination of the application assessment process.

Performance to plan

While the large, international and multi-organisational nature of the research has led to complications in many of the projects, most of these have been successfully addressed internally, and the majority of the funded projects have been delivered on time, on budget and to specification.

Views on collaborative working

Collaborative working has brought a number of advantages to researchers, including a pooling of expertise, a pooling of data, increased international profile, an opportunity to learn new techniques and an opportunity to develop junior colleagues (including giving junior colleagues an opportunity to work with leading international figures, and, in one case, securing a department funding for a new PhD student).

Difficulties around communication remain the greatest challenge, although this is becoming easier following new technological advances, while other challenges relate to project administration, differences of opinion between researchers and issues around finance.

Academic impacts

Evidence from our survey provides further support to the rapporteurs view (discussed in section 2), that ECRP has led to research that is of significant academic and scientific value. In particular, the programme has led to citations, academic publications and conference papers in all 19 of the UK studies, while it has also led to new theories, new data sets and increased researcher standing in the majority of cases.

Non-academic impacts

The majority of the researchers we interviewed believed that their research had implications for policy making, and could help to evidence and guide policy makers in their decision making. This view is supported by the rapporteurs comments discussed in section 2. However, there is limited evidence, either from our researcher surveys and our survey of policy makers, to suggest that this potential is being delivered in practice, and there may be implications here for how the research is disseminated in future.

Additionality

There is strong evidence of additionality, and none of the projects would have taken place to the same scale and with the same partners in the absence of ESRC's support.

Conclusions

The report concluded that:

- the project has contributed to UK social science research by increasing the profile of the UK's senior social science researchers; supporting the development of emerging researchers and increasing the profile of UK social science institutions
- the structure of the ECRP programme was conducive to the delivery of high impact, scientifically robust academic research, and the programme has generated significant academic research outcomes
- In every case that we examined, the lead researcher had a pre-existing professional relationship with at least one of their international collaborators. However, there is evidence to suggest the ECRP had a major impact on strengthening pre-existing networks

- While researchers and rapporteurs both saw significant policy relevance in the research, the evidence suggests that policy makers do not currently use the research to its full potential
- A substantial majority of respondents felt that the ECRP's funding mechanism was well designed and appropriate to their needs. However, there were some concerns about differences in application processes between national research councils, differences in award decision making timescales between national research councils, the requirement for three applications to be accepted for the research to proceed and the possibility of the lead researcher being refused funding.

Recommendations

The report makes four recommendations:

1. Investigator driver, international collaborative research should be allowed to continue - the ECRP filled a clearly recognised 'gap in the market' for this form of research and, without the programme, some forms of comparative international academic research with policy value would not be carried out
2. Need for better international co-ordination - more can be done to co-ordinate the activities of the participating research councils, including the adoption of consistent application forms, consistent bid assessment timescales, and collective bid scoring
3. Need for better support infrastructure - many of the researchers would benefit from a central resource within the research funding organisation offering for project management and administration support
4. Need for better dissemination - the ESRC could play a greater role in assisting researchers with the dissemination of their research to policy makers and practitioners, this may include the organisation of dissemination events, the issuing of press releases to publicise the findings of ESRC funded research or the provision of an advice and support service to assist researchers in their own dissemination activities.

Introduction and approach

Frontline was commissioned by ESRC in May to conduct an evaluation of the Council's participation in the European Collaborative Research Project (ECRP).

Background

The European Collaborative Research Project (ECRP) scheme was established in 2001 to promote investigator-driven, multinational collaborative research in the social sciences in Europe and beyond. ECRP operates in the responsive-mode and its annual call for proposals is open to applications in all fields of the social sciences.

The scheme offers opportunities to test innovative ideas, pool expertise and strengthen research capacity in line with the objectives of the European Research Area. Researchers may collaborate across participating countries on any subject which demonstrates a need for international cooperation, while the funding remains at a national level. The scheme has a one-stage application procedure and a two-stage international peer review process coordinated by the European Science Foundation which sets a high quality benchmark for the funded proposals.

19 projects were funded by the ESRC between 2001 and 2010 through this mechanism with the final project due to be completed in 2014.

Evaluation aims

The evaluation aims were to assess:

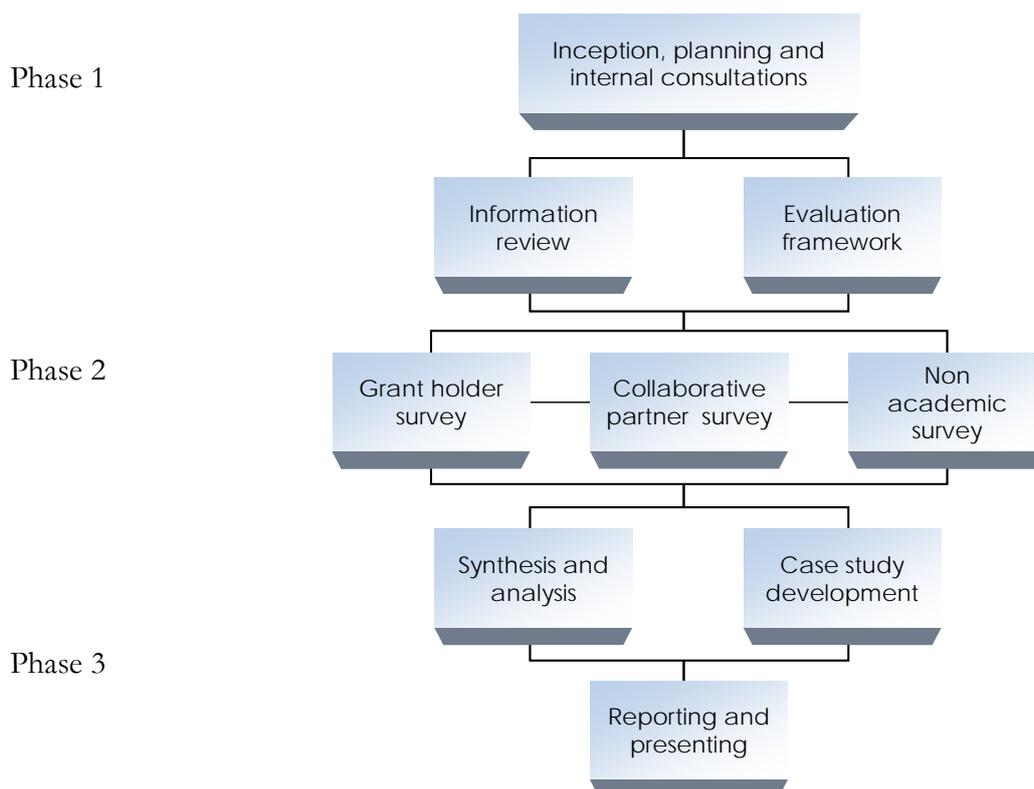
- the contribution to UK social science research made by the ESRC supported European Collaborative Research Projects
- the scientific quality and academic impact of the ESRC-funded research supported through the ECRP, and any lessons learned regarding maximising these attributes
- the extent to which international networks were fostered
- the extent to which the investment has had an impact upon policy and practice and any lessons learned regarding maximising the non-academic impact of research
- the relative merits of the ECRP funding mechanism as an avenue for international collaborative funding, providing guidance on future international collaborative funding priorities for the ESRC.

Approach

The approach to the evaluation was broadly split into three phases to align with the aims of the study:

- inception and evaluation framework development
- fieldwork and progress reporting
- analysis and final reporting.

The diagram below presents these in more detail:



A copy of the grant holder survey is appended. We used the same overall structure for the EU collaborators, but changed the questions very slightly. For the non academic/policy holder survey, we created a short survey to determine the wider policy impacts. A copy of the question set is appended.

The next sections detail provides an overview of the programme, and the projects that it supported. This is followed by the findings of our primary research. We then end our report with our conclusions and recommendations.

Programme overview

Application procedures and project award decisions

The ESRC was a partner in the ECRP over a nine year period, between 2001 and 2010. Under the scheme, each of the national partners issued their own call for proposals at the start of the calendar year, scored these using their own, single stage application form, and made their own decision as to which projects to support. Only collaborative projects that were approved in three or more European nations were allowed to proceed.

Since 2001 19 projects have been funded in the UK; and at the time of the interviews five of these were still underway. The most recent call in 2010 resulted in two projects being funded. Total UK funding has been in the order of £3.7million.

While the funded research spans the full range of the social sciences, many of the funded research projects focus on common themes, including:

- understanding migration:addressed through both Prof Brown and Prof Williams’ research
- delivering better public services: addressed through Dr Kendall and Prof Ozga’s work
- understanding human interactions: addressed through Prof Drew, Prof Manstead and Prof Haggard’s research
- conflict resolution and social cohesion: addressed through Prof Cooke, Prof Gleditsch and Dr Saunders’ research.

A detailed breakdown per project is presented in the table below.

Project name and number	UK PI	Completion date	Funding
1. Reading Acquisition and Disability in European Orthographies’	Professor P Seymour	September 2004	£100,349.82
2. Third Sector European Policy (TSEP)	Dr J Kendall	September 2005	£31,851.36
3. Affiliation and disaffiliation in action: language and social cohesion	Professor W Drew	June 2006	£137,460.23
4. Immigration, Racism and Acculturation: A Three Nation Study	Professor R Brown	January 2007	£149,320.92
5. Technology, Talent and Tolerance	Professor P	June 2007	£154,108.43

Project name and number	UK PI	Completion date	Funding
in European Cities: A Comparative Analysis	Cooke,		
6. Poverty Dynamics and Fertility in Developing Countries	Dr A Aassve	August 2007	£177,642.23
7. Home Ownership, Commuting and Labour Mobility	Dr H Battu	August 2006	£42,587.79
8. Variable Pay, Industrial Relations and Collective Bargaining'	Professor P Marginson	June 2007	£146,774.70
9. Emotions and Social Identity: Toward an Integrated View of Intergroup Conflict'	Professor R Spears	August 2008	£193,017.57
10. Science and Technology Research in a Knowledge-Based Economy	Professor R Griffith	September 2010	£182,814.10
11. Sources of linguistic control over eye movements	Professor A Kennedy	May 2003	£371,948.88
12. Fabricating Quality in European Education	Professor J Ozga	July 2009	£374,821.80
13. Migration and Networks of Care in Europe: A Comparative European Research Project	Professor JF Williams	December 2009	£48,634.82
14. Disaggregating Civil Wars'	Professor K Gleditsch	September 2010	£334,225.13
15. The short and long range dynamics of attention'	Professor G Humphreys	February 2012	£157,869.22
16. The Politics of Attention: West European Politics in Times of Change'	Professor P John	July 2011	£239,179.40
17. Caught in the Act of Protest: Contextualising Contestation (CCC)	Dr C Saunders	April 2013.	£225,602.97
18. Regulatory functions of social emotions in cooperation'	Professor A Manstead	January 2013	£234,197.44
19. Intentional Inhibition of Human Action'	Professor P Haggard	September 2014	£401,613.28
Total Funding			£3,704,020.09

Funding committed and levered

The ESRC only funds the UK element and as such funding is also levered from various European countries to support the collaborative element of the programme. The table below shows the UK compared to EU and indicates the number of countries involved since established.

Year	UK funding level €	Number of UK projects funded	Total EU funding Excluding UK €	UK as a proportion of total %	Number of countries in addition to UK
2001	102,000	2	2,575,000	3.8%	12
2002	290,000	2	1,219,000	19.2%	11
2003	464,000	3	1,256,000	26.9%	8
2004	772,000	3	5,051,539	13.2%	14
2005	1,087,000	3	3,700,000	22.7%	14
2006	871,000	2	3,870,350	18.4%	15
2007	897,000	2	1,033,000	46.5%	5
2008	260 325	1	Awaiting info	n/a	n/a
2009	464 237	1	960,028	32.6%	3
Total	4,483,000	19	Over19.645m	under 22.8%	14

Over the life time of the proportion of UK funding compared to EU has shown considerable fluctuation, reaching a maximum of 46 per cent in 2007. In the early stages of the fund projects generally smaller, however as the programme found its feet and with the onset of full economic costing, the project budgets increased.

Academic and scientific quality of research outputs

Twelve of the projects were completed and fully peer reviewed at the time of our evaluation. Of these:

- one was rated as ‘outstanding’ by all three of the rapporteurs
- one received two ‘outstanding’ ratings and one ‘very good’ rating
- three received two ‘outstanding’ ratings and one ‘good’ rating
- three received one ‘outstanding’ ratings and two ‘good’ ratings
- three received three ‘good’ ratings.

None of the twelve researchers received a ‘problematic’ or ‘unacceptable’ rating in any of the 36 reviews conducted. The table overleaf shows, for each of these studies, the rating received, evidence of research impact, and notable comments received. We also provide a case study to illustrate a best practice example of the impacts that this programme has had.

In addition to these findings from a rapporteur’s perspective, we provide details of the lead researcher’s perceptions of academic impacts in the next section.

Proj. no.	Rating received	Rapporteur comments
1	Good (x3)	The project was praised for its ambition, and was considered to have been “deservedly funded”. Rapporteurs particularly praised its ambition to “trace the development of foundation literacy from the beginning of learning up to a point when full competence was achieved”. However the UK project has suffered, through no fault of its own, due to delays in the research projects of the European partner nations. Because of this, some of the research objectives are still to be addressed, including issues of policy interest such as those relating to school starting ages and methods of instruction.
2	Outstanding (x1) Good (x2)	While only an exploratory study, the rapporteurs felt that it had “begun to fill an important gap” in an under-developed field of academic research, and helped to develop a common language for a subject that is viewed differently in UK/US and Continental European environments. The lead researcher was praised for his ability to manage a complex project with “seamless skill”, and the work was cited as a good example of “the sort of leverage that relatively modest investments by the ESRC can bring, when they allow UK researchers to participate in – and in this case lead – larger international efforts.”
3	Outstanding (x2) Good (x1)	
4	Good (x3)	The research was seen as a “timely” response to “a main challenge for the European countries” involved in the study. The method involved an “impressively large” sample of participants, and the use of an “elegant solution” to examine the causal relations which lead to racism and acculturation. This has led to a report that “adds considerably to the research literature”, though there is scope to interrogate the research findings in more detail and to disseminate the findings to a wider audience.
5	Good (x3)	The research followed a “sound and rigorous” approach to replicate, in a UK and European context, Richard Florida’s research into the role of creative industries and the creative class in US economic development. While there were some concerns about under-utilising the qualitative evidence gathered, and the use of inexact terminology in the reporting, this study has led to a valuable database of creative industries in England and Wales, and has produced findings that are “extremely topical” both in academic debate, and across urban regeneration and economic development more generally.
6	Outstanding (x2) Good (x1)	While the key subject matter of this research, namely the relationship between poverty and fertility in developing countries, is regarded as “one of the key relationships in development economics”, it is also relationship that previously received little attention from academic researchers due to the limited availability of statistical data. The researchers used “sophisticated statistical techniques” to overcome these challenges and this allowed them to meet the research objectives in full, and deliver an impressive volume of published papers. The researchers were also commended for their dissemination work with

Proj. no.	Rating received	Rapporteur comments
		internationally known development bodies.
7	Good (x3)	The research study was considered to be of a high technical standard, which followed robust econometric techniques. Its focus on the distinction between long and short term moves was also considered to be an “intuitive and useful” extension to the existing literature. However, there were some concerns around the lack of novel research findings in an already well research field, and the lack of international comparison of the data gathered by each of the international research teams.
8	Outstanding (x2) Good (x1)	The research sought to examine the relationship between variable pay, industrial relations and collective bargaining for two very different sectors (machinery and equipment manufacturing and retail banking) across four different countries. While the rapporteurs held strongly differing opinions on the value of this approach, the majority view was that this offered a useful holistic insight into the issue. All three rapporteurs agreed that the research objectives were met in full, and that the data acquired can be used to support future research.
9	Outstanding (x3)	This study considered the implications of identity conflict and identity flexibility of people holding dual (Welsh and British) identity, and how these inform political influence and mobilisation attempts. It was rated as ‘outstanding’ in each of its three peer reviews. The rapporteurs found that the research advanced existing theoretical work in the field by combining social-identity theory with inter-group emotion theory, and applying this in the context of Welsh identity; the “original and unusual” mixed-method approach allowed a richer and deeper understanding of the issues than would be possible using a single methodology approach and the research findings can be applied “to real political issues” and are therefore of practical value to those working in this field.
11	Outstanding (x1) Good (x2)	This research, into the sources of linguistic control over eye moment, was considered to have had a major scientific impact, leading to publications in leading journals which have instigated debate, particularly around the issue of serial versus parallel processing in reading. The research has also led to the creation of a useful database of eye moments in reading that can be used for further research in the future. However, one rapporteur was concerned that some of the objectives (particularly around reading patterns amongst dyslexia sufferers) were not fully addressed by the research. There was also a view that the research may be of limited societal value in the short term, though work in the field could have longer term implications for educational practice in the longer term.
12	Outstanding (x1) Good (x2)	Although the research encountered a number of difficulties, including the departure of a key member of the project team, and a limited response rate to the teachers’ survey, all of the objectives of the project were met. The research has led to an improved understanding of how Quality Assurance and Evaluation (QAE) are used as a form of governance in education and, as a result of close working relationship with policy makers throughout the duration of the

Proj. no.	Rating received	Rapporteur comments
		research, and effective dissemination after the research, the project is already thought to have shaped the Scottish Government's approach to educational governance.
13	Outstanding (x2) Very Good (x1)	All of the rapporteurs agreed that this was a well-designed piece of research, built around clear and relevant objectives that were met in full. The result was an interesting study that developed conclusions of significant policy importance, particularly around the international dynamics to the political economy of care, and the inter-dependencies between work, employment and care policy. The research was very well disseminated, most notably at a supra-national policy level, where invited papers were submitted to the United Nations, however more work may be required for the researchers to exploit full value from the data gathered in the process of the research.

Case Study - Affiliation and disaffiliation in action: language and social cohesion

The project brought together a strong research team, with expertise in both linguistics and conversational analysis. This allowed the research to consider the issue of social cohesion as an interactional achievement based on an initiation of sequences, distinguishing it from other research in the field.

The research was commended in the peer review comments, and received two 'outstanding' ratings, with the following considered as highlights:

- The unusual method of connecting Conversation Analysis and Linguistics, particularly syntactic variation and, to some extent, phonological variation.
- The contribution made to conversational analysis. Although it has always been known that, in interaction, every act is both prospective and retrospective, conversational analysis work has in most cases concerned itself with the prospective property of interactional acts, and this research was considered innovative in this respect.

As a language focused project, this research benefited from the ECRP's international approach, as it allowed for co-ordinated research amongst 18 researchers from across Europe, and allowed evidence to be gathered from different countries, where different languages were spoken.

The academic value of the research was demonstrated by the ICCA's decision to offer the lead researcher the keynote speakers slot at their 2006 conference, the decision to award the UK lead an RCUK Fellowship, and the decision to award the Finnish partner institution Centre of Excellence status. In non-academic circles, the research was considered to be of value to "any corporation which deals with requests/complaints from the general public".

Summary

The ESRC allocated €4.483 million towards 19 ECRP funded projects between 2001 and 2011, This led to a leveraging of over €19.645 million of additional funding for European partner projects from other ESF member bodies.

Each of the 12 projects that have been completed and peer reviewed to date received ratings of either 'good', 'very good' or 'outstanding' from all three of their rapporteurs, with one rated as 'outstanding' by all three reviewers.

Consultation findings

Introduction

This section of the report brings together the key findings from:

- 16 UK based research participants
- 8 overseas based research partners.

We will use this evidence to consider:

- why the researchers chose to participate in ECRP, and what they hoped to achieve through this
- the process researchers used to select their partners, and the extent to which they undertook collaborative working prior to this programme
- researchers view on the processes used to deliver the programme, and how these can be improved
- whether researchers succeeded in achieving all of their objectives
- what researchers see as the key benefits and challenges of collaborative working
- the academic, policy and business benefits that have occurred as a result of the ECRP supported research
- the extent to which the research would have taken place in the absence of the programme
- overall perceptions of the programme.

Rationale and objectives

Findings from UK researcher survey

We asked each UK researcher to describe their objectives and rationale for undertaking their research, and their reasons for choosing to do so through the ECRP programme:

- nine of the UK respondents pursued the project as they considered it to be of academic interest, and they saw the fund as an opportunity to bring together researchers from a range of different countries
- four of the UK respondents pursued the project as they considered it to be of academic interest, and they saw the fund as an opportunity to either aggregate or compare new data from a range of different countries

- one UK respondent pursued the project as they considered it to be of policy interest
- two of the UK respondents chose to get involved in a project after a research contact in another European country approached them with the idea.

One of the respondents noted that his peers in the USA were producing the most interesting research in his field, as they had a greater culture of collaborative working. He suggested that this fund was a useful way of responding to this. Another stated that, as his work related to the analysis of linguistic patterns; a pan-European approach was an ideal way of gathering data across speakers of different languages.

Five of the respondents stated that they considered both EU Framework Programme and the ECRP programme. Three of these stated that they chose ECRP as they saw it as less bureaucratic. Two others stated that they chose ECRP as they felt it allowed them greater freedom to choose their own research hypothesis and methodology.

“Having completed research in the US the ECRP programme allowed truly comparative research to be conducted and to analyse the research based on a data from a number of different language speakers”.

Findings from international collaborators survey

We asked the same question to each of the international collaborative researchers in our sample.

- Four of these researchers cited data issues as the key motivating factor for their participation. In two of these instances, the researcher saw the programme as an opportunity to replicate research techniques developed in other countries using data from their own country. In another two cases, the researcher saw the programme as an opportunity to compare data across nations. In one case this was to understand the impacts of different national educational policies or attainment, while in the other it was to understand the difference language makes to social cohesion.
- Three of the researchers saw the programme as an opportunity to bring together the leading experts in the subject matter from across Europe so as to improve the quality of the research outcomes.
- The remaining researcher saw the project as an opportunity to further develop an existing collaborative research relationship.

“ECRP allowed for a critical mass of knowledge, bringing together people with different expertise”

Summary

These findings illustrate that the ECRP addressed a number of market failures in the field of research funding, allowing research to take place in areas that would not receive funding otherwise, including research based upon data from different countries or linguistic areas, and international comparative research. The ECRP helps Europe to achieve critical mass in the delivery of high quality research based on leading expertise, thus helping it to compete on a more even footing with the US research base.

Selection of partners

Findings from UK researcher survey

We asked each respondent to describe what relationship they had with their research partners prior to this programme:

- all sixteen of the survey respondents had some form of pre-existing relationship with at least one of their research partners
- eleven had previously undertaken a collaborative research project with at least one of their research partners
- thirteen of the respondents had not formally collaborated with one of their partners, but had either met them at a conference or exchanged ideas
- five respondents had no previous contact with at least one of their research partners.

Respondents highlighted the importance of pre-existing relationships, and particularly previous research projects, which helped in establishing the research parameters at an early stage. In addition, researchers highlighted that having worked with partners enabled some of the outcomes of the research to have a truly transnational context as they had previous experience of each other's research.

“I have worked with the partners frequently in the past, and saw the fund as a good opportunity to undertake a comparative study of education policy in Europe”.

“Some of our previous research had indicated a potential for cross country collaboration and the ECRP programme gave us the opportunity to test this”.

Findings from international collaborators survey

We asked the same question to each of the European collaborators in our sample:

- all eight reported some form of pre-existing relationship with each of their research partners
- four had previously undertaken a collaborative research project with at least one of their research partners
- four had not formally collaborated with one of their partners, but had either met them at a conference or exchanged ideas.

“ERCP and the support from our funder allowed us to cooperate with fellow international (European) scholars around a project of research interest”.

“In the case of the fellow Scandinavian collaborators, these are people we work with all the time. The research community in Scandinavia is very small and its ‘natural’ that they should work collaboratively as well as look for wider collaboration to get the job done”.

Summary

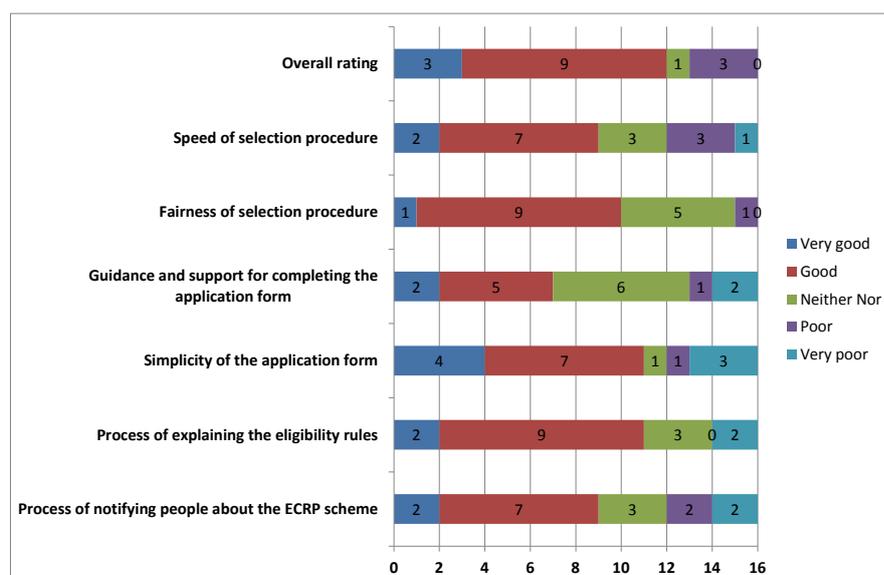
While the programme rarely produced new relationships between researchers, it did lead to a strengthening of existing relationships, and gave researchers an opportunity to work together more closely than they would have done otherwise.

Process review

Findings from UK researcher survey

We asked the UK respondents to provide a rating for a range of aspects of the ESRC's application and selection process. Eleven of the sixteen respondents said that, overall, the process was either "good" or "very good". Two said that it was "neither good nor bad", while two said that it was "poor", and one said that it was "very poor".

The simplicity of the application form and the process for explaining the eligibility rules received the most positive responses, each with eleven "good" or "very good" ratings. The speed of the selection procedure received the most negative responses, with four "poor" or "very poor" ratings, though even here, the positive ratings outweighed the negative.



One respondent noted that the application form for the programme was very similar to the ESRC standard application form for other funding streams, and argued that this helped to keep the process simple. Another stated that the focus on research outputs, rather than activities and processes was a commendable aspect of the selection procedures.

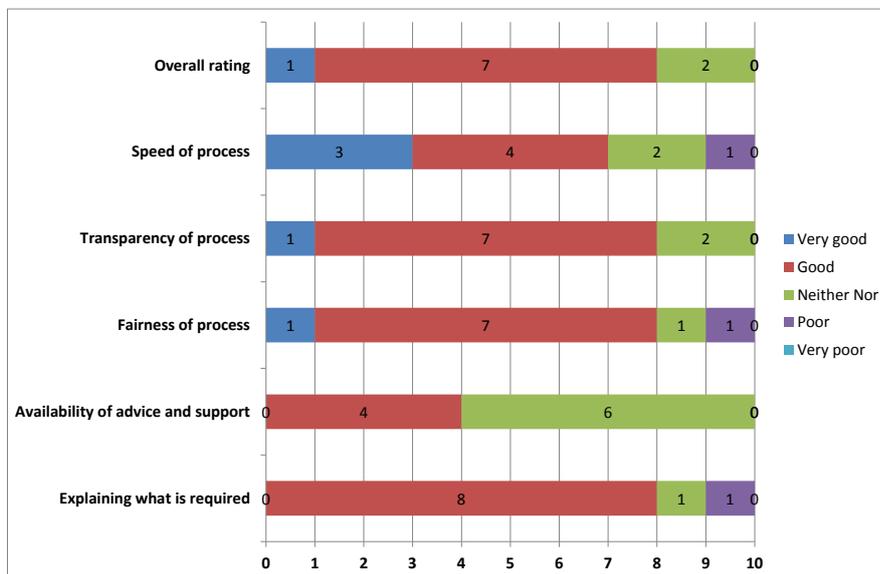
Three respondents suggested that the programme was insufficiently advertised. Two respondents suggested that communication between the funding bodies could have been improved, with one suggesting that particular care should be taken to avoid situations where the lead applicant is refused funding, but supporting applicants are given funding. Another suggested that a lack of co-ordination of timescales between the funding bodies caused project delays, as their

application was approved by two funding bodies (including ESRC), but the project could not started until they received a response from the third.

It was also suggested that the requirement for the project to receive funding from each of the collaborator’s national bodies was overly prescriptive, as it increased the risk of one body preventing the entire study from taking place.

Each of the ten respondents who had completed their research was asked to comment on the appropriateness of the peer review process. Overall, seven rated the process as “good”, one rated it as “very good”, one rated it as “poor” and one rated it as ‘neither good nor poor’.

The speed of the process was rated as “very good” by five of the respondent, while the transparency and fairness criteria also received one “very good” rating. Over half the respondents stated that they did not request any advice or support in relation to the peer review process, leading to a large number of “neither good nor poor” responses against this criterion. None of the respondents scored the process as ‘very poor’ against any of the criteria.



None of the respondents appeared to have strong feeling either for or against the peer review process, and comments included “it was all fine”, and “it was a fairly standard process”.

“Cumbersome process but facilitated cross-national research”.

“It was straightforward for resources to flow to different teams - no sub contract arrangements – this is much better than other EU funding programmes”.

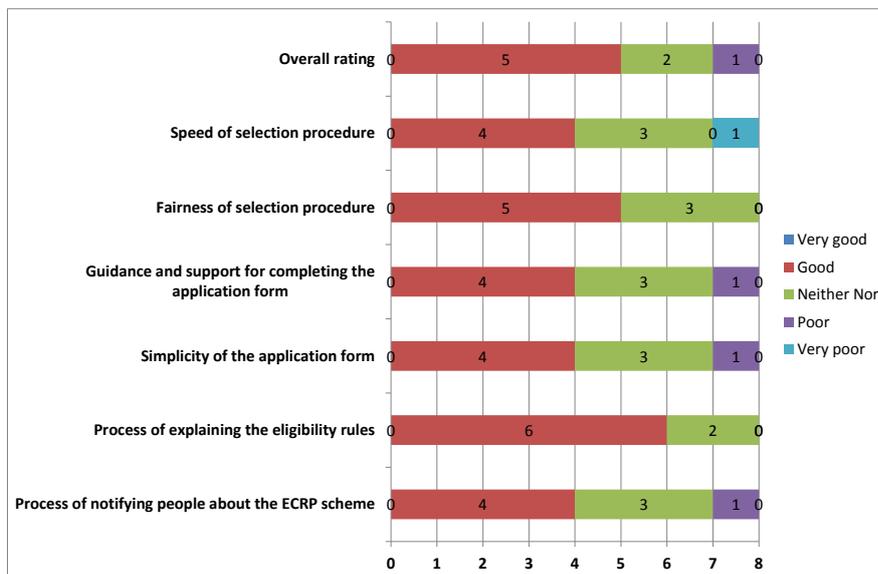
“The process is mostly focused on substance rather than irrelevant formalities. The overall burden of putting together the proposal is substantial but still worth it”.

“Co-ordination between the ESF members was poor, they had their application accepted, but the lead application from Cork was refused - caused considerable confusion”.

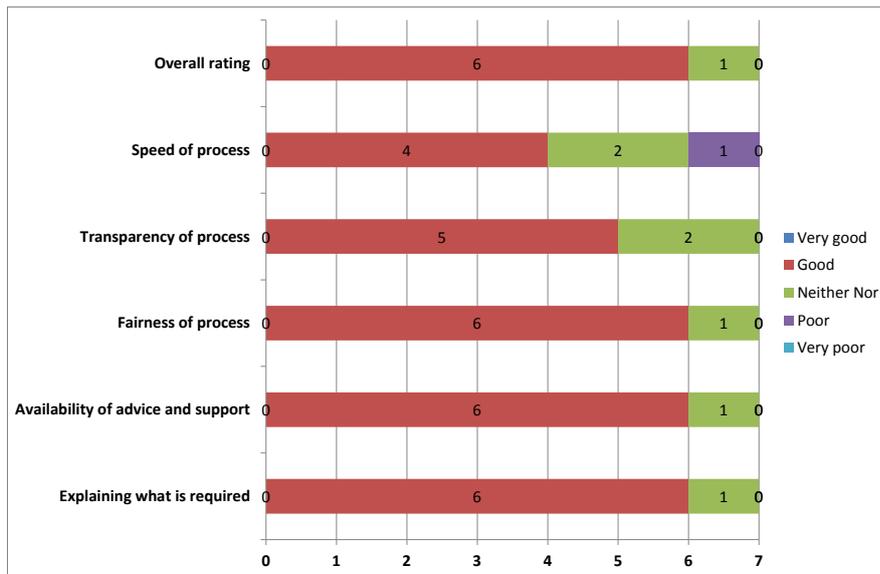
Findings from International collaborator survey

We also asked each of the eight international collaborators to express their opinions on the quality of the application processes run by their national funding agencies. While these agencies did not receive a “very good” rating against any of the criteria, six rated the process for explaining the eligibility rules as “good”, while five rated the fairness of the selection procedures as “good” and five scored their national funding agency as “good” overall. One respondent rated the speed of the selection procedure as “very poor”, while one scored their funding agency as “poor” overall.

Two of the respondents were critical at the lack of co-ordination between the funding bodies and, in particular, the fact that each of the nations had a different application form, with some more difficult to compete than others.



We also asked all seven of the collaborators who had completed their research to rate their national funding agency’s peer review process. Overall, six respondents rated the process as “good”, while one rated it as “neither good nor poor”. One respondent rated the speed of the process as “poor”, however the agencies did not receive any negative ratings against any of the other criteria.



“Easier process [than other EU funding]– more symmetry between the team – genuine collaborative effort”.

“Process of engaging with Swedish Research Council was straightforward”.

“Transparent, un-bureaucratic and speedy”.

Summary

The ESRC has adopted an application process and funding model which is consistent with all other ESRC funded research, and is considered transparent, fair and easy to understand. While a minority of respondents have concerns about the speed of the selection process and the process of notifying people about the scheme, these are also well regarded by most researchers.

In line with ESF guidance, the ESRC’s partner organisations follow a similar application process to the ESRC, and these are also well regarded by local researchers.

However, while each research council follows the same research **processes**, differences still exist between the research **forms** used, and there are concerns around the international co-ordination of the application assessment process.

Performance to plan

Findings from UK researcher survey

Respondents were asked whether their project was delivered to plan and to budget, and whether they succeeded in achieving all of their project objectives. Twelve researchers answered these questions, while four were unable to answer them as their research was at too early a stage.

- eight projects were delivered within the time expected in the project plan, while four took longer

- five were delivered under budget, five were delivered to budget, while two were slightly above budget
- ten projects met all of the research objectives, while two met most of the objectives.

Factors which had an adverse impact on the delivery of the research include:

- lack of own time due to commitment to other research projects (three mentions)
- lack of time on the part of the collaborative partner (two mentions)
- technical and methodological issues (three mentions)
- lack of own time due to other teaching commitments (two mentions)
- lack of staff availability to deliver the project (one mention)
- bureaucracy associated with the ongoing management of the project (one mention)
- lack of expertise on the part of the collaborative partner (one mention)
- illness (one mention).

None of the respondents identified access to internal or external funding as a barrier.

Findings from international collaborators survey

We also asked the international collaborators to report whether their project was delivered to plan and to budget, and whether they succeeded in achieving all of their project objectives. All eight researchers felt able to answer this question.

- five projects were delivered within the time expected in the project plan, while two took longer and one was delivered ahead of schedule
- two were delivered under budget, while 6 were delivered to budget
- six projects met all of the research objectives, while two met most of the objectives.

Factors which had an adverse impact on the delivery of the research included (one mention for each):

- a lack of institute finance to deliver the project
- a lack of external finance to deliver the project
- bureaucracy associated with the on-going management of the project
- lack of own time due to other teaching commitments
- lack of time on the part of the collaborative partner
- lack of expertise on the part of the collaborative partner .

Summary

While the large, international and multi-organisational nature of the research has led to complications in many of the projects, most of these have been successfully addressed internally, and the majority of the funded projects have been delivered on time, on budget and to specification.

Views on collaborative working

Findings from UK researcher survey

Respondents identified a number of benefits associated with collaborative working, including:

- a critical mass a resulting from a pooling of expertise and data (three mentions)
- an opportunity to learn techniques and ideas from partner researchers (one mention)
- delivery of research that increases their profile (particularly outside of the UK) (one mention)
- a development opportunity for their research students (one mention) .

The most commonly cited challenge in collaborative working was difficulties in maintaining regular communication, which was mentioned by three researchers. In all cases respondents said that they were able to get around this by organising regular face to face or virtual meetings. A respondent who was involved in one of the first studies funded noted that the challenge became easier over time as internet communication tools such as Skype became more commonplace.

Other challenges identified included (one mention each):

- lack of good quality, consistent data across different countries
- lack of central project co-ordination as a result of the identified project lead being refused funding
- methodological differences of opinion between researchers
- an overseas partner having difficulties accessing finance.

Twelve of the 16 respondents had firm plans in place to collaborate with at least one of their research partners again on another project. Two stated that they “probably would” but that they had no firm plans to do so. One said that they “certainly would not” due to bad experiences on this project, while one was unable to answer as their project was at a very early stage.

“Could have submitted as standalone, but looking for added value. Had previously been part of an ECRP project - really good scheme, lots of benefits”.

“The ECRP helped deepen and further develop what was already an extremely valuable and successful network of collaboration”.

“For me, the project embedded my work in an international network of expertise not available to me on the national level. For my institution: the project provided the opportunity to organise an international event that was of a pioneering nature within this country”.

“Helped increase contact with other researchers. Expanded research across EU/not working in UK silo. Meetings particularly useful”.

Findings from international collaborators survey

In response to the same question on collaborative working, respondents cited:

- improved quality of research outputs (two mentions)
- opportunity to draw on the skills and knowledge of other researchers (two mentions)
- ability to recruit and develop a PhD student (one mention)
- widening of networks (one mention).

Challenges identified included (one mention each):

- maintaining communications
- understanding the expertise of each researcher, and what they offered to the project
- other participants not keeping commitments
- project management difficulties.

Five of the eight respondents had firm plans in place to collaborate with at least one of their research partners again on another project. One stated that they “probably would” but that they had no firm plans to do so. One said that they “probably would not”, but would if the right opportunity presented itself.

“Forced to think outside the box. Different skills/expertise - need to think about these. Increased awareness of other areas and bringing in new ideas from cross-disciplinary focus/different perspective”.

A bit more international visibility. Allowed them to do a larger piece of research that got published in a more high profile journal.

Summary

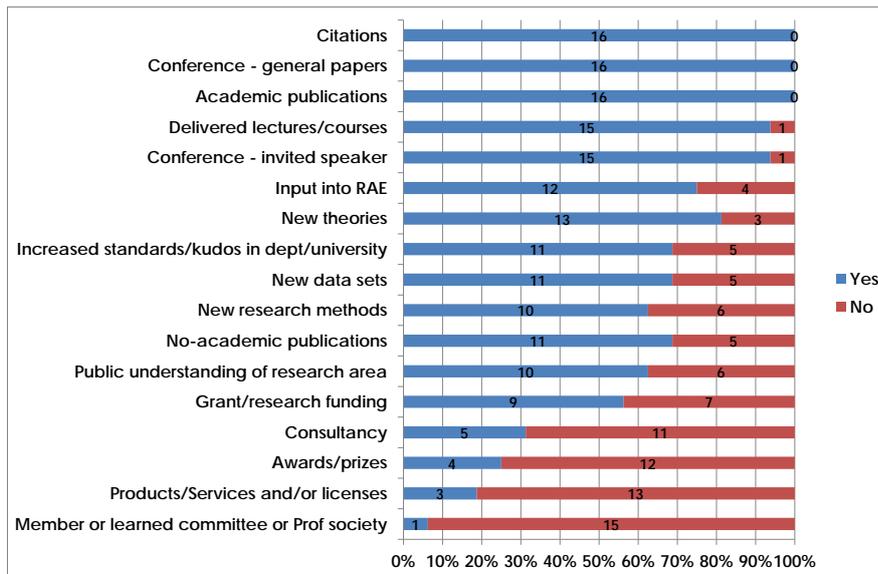
Collaborative working has brought a number of advantages to researchers, including a pooling of expertise, a pooling of data, increased international profile, an opportunity to learn new techniques and an opportunity to develop junior colleagues (including giving junior colleagues an opportunity to work with leading international figures, and, in one case, securing a department funding for a new PhD student).

Difficulties around communication remain the greatest challenge, although this is becoming easier following new technological advances, while other challenges relate to project administration, differences of opinion between researchers and issues around finance.

Academic impacts

Findings from UK research survey

All 16 respondents stated that they had either received, or expect to receive citations; have submitted/will submit general conference papers, and had/will have their research published in an academic publication. All but one used their material to deliver lectures or courses and appeared as an invited speaker at a conference.



The volume of outputs achieved varied with project, but the range was immense, for example:

- single publications to over 200 across the group
- book chapters to numerous books
- conference presentation to invited speaker.

In addition, the majority of UK respondents highlighted multiple different types of outputs.

“Still producing papers. Twelve papers, various book chapters - UK and Europe - 2010 builds on this work”.

“Overall more than twenty five publications. The Dundee/Edinburgh team more than ten. Influential papers in Vision research and Psychological Review. Contributions to a significant controversial topic ("serial" versus "parallel" processing models)”.

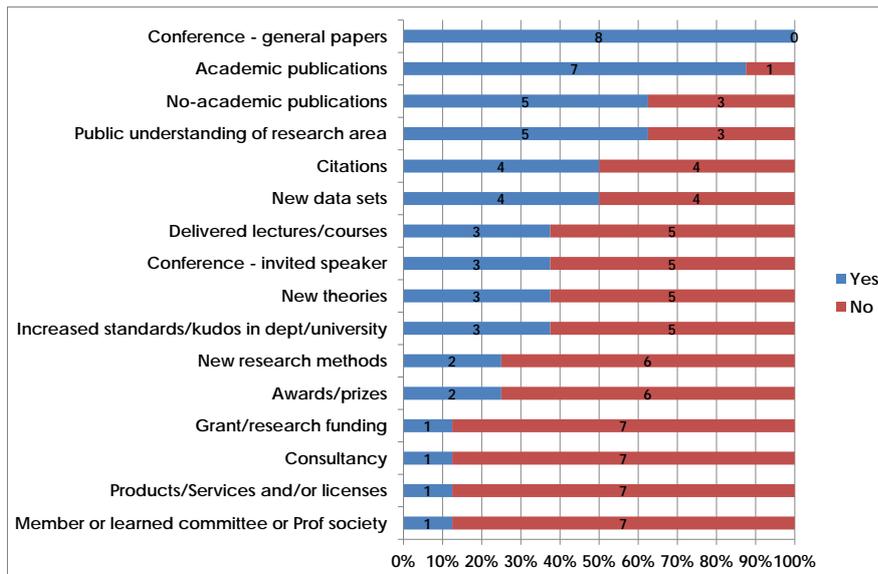
“UK - 30 - Europe circa 200”

“A very large number (at least twenty). The most important of these are a book that is under contract with Cambridge University Press, a forthcoming article in the American Political Science Review, an article in The Journal of Conflict Resolution and one in World Politics.”

We provide further detail on the academic impacts in the programme overview chapter.

Findings from international collaborators survey

The figures below show how the eight international collaborators responded to this question. It shows that all eight respondents either produced or expected to produce a conference paper, while seven of the eight expected to see their work published in an academic publication. However, the international collaborators reported fewer impacts against many of the other indicators with, for example, only half noting that their work had been cited.



“One article by Danish Team in journal of Urban Economics which is the leading field journal”.

“Six papers in total, including two high profile papers in the Journal of Pragmatics, one on offers and one on requesting”

Summary

Evidence from our survey provides further support to the rapporteurs view (discussed in section two), that ECRP has led to research that is of significant academic and scientific value. In particular, the programme has led to citations, academic publications and conference papers in all nineteen of the UK studies, while it has also led to new theories, new data sets and increased researcher standing in the majority of cases.

Non-academic impacts

Findings from UK research survey

Each of the UK researchers interviewed felt that their research could be of value to policy makers, businesses and society more widely. Examples of ways in which they believed the research could be used included:

- helping to shape Government policy in the areas of welfare and migration
- helping the Government to gather better data on educational quality
- identifying more effective ways of delivering occupational therapy
- understanding what Governments can do to shape the development of the UK’s third sector
- improve relations between ethnic groups
- help the Government to better understand the relationship between housing tenure and economic growth.

However, in spite of the perceived policy value of the research, there is only limited evidence to suggest that policy makers are using this evidence to its full potential. The most significant examples of the research being used by non-academics were:

- eight of the researchers had their work mentioned in newspapers or magazines
- ten were cited in Government policy papers or strategies
- four either received enquiries from, or gave evidence to Government committees or policy makers.

Findings from international collaborators survey

Our international survey yielded further examples of the potential value of the research by policy makers and society in general. These included:

- allowing countries to draw lessons from educational practices elsewhere in Europe
- help Government's understand the implications of tax systems on labour mobility
- help intermediaries understand what techniques are most effective for conflict resolution.

However, there was only a limited number of instances where the research has been quoted by policy makers or used in the press. They include:

- two instances where the researchers had their work mentioned in newspapers or magazines
- two studies which were cited in Government policy papers or strategies
- three researchers who either received enquiries from, or gave evidence to Government committees or policy makers.

Findings from survey of policy makers

We asked each of the UK researchers to identify any policy makers who they had communicated with as part of their research dissemination. The researchers were also asked to provide this information as part of their reporting obligations to ESRC. Based on the information from each of these sources, we identified a list of fifty four organisations who the researchers believed had benefited in some way from their research. From this list we were able to identify forty four named individuals within those organisations, and we obtained contact email addresses for twenty five of these. We include a full list of all of this information in Appendix 2. We contacted all of the names on this list three times and invited them to complete a short eleven question on-line survey to describe the impacts that the research had on them and their organisations.

While it was anticipated that this approach would help to generate some new qualitative insights into user perceptions of the research, we were conscious of the limitations associated with this approach. In particular, we recognised that in many cases, the research took place several years ago, and therefore the dissemination activities may not be fresh in the minds of the policy beneficiaries, many of whom may now have moved on to different roles. Further, we recognised that some users may not have had sufficient contact or knowledge of the projects to be in a position where they can comment on the level of impact that the projects have had.

Because of the above, response rates to this survey were very low (despite numerous reminders), with only three individuals completing the survey, and a further three contacting us by email to

say that they had no involvement in the research, and were not aware that it had taken place. This is a significant finding in itself, as it suggests that some of the researchers may have over-estimated the impact of their dissemination activities.

Key findings from the three completed surveys included:

- one of the three respondents became involved in the research at the scoping stage
- two of the respondents contributed to the research as interviewees, while one did not contribute towards the research, but was informed of the findings at the research dissemination stage
- all three received a copy of the research findings
- none of the respondents contributed financially towards the research, and all three stated that they would be unable to provide any financial support towards the research, even if the ESRC funding were not in place
- two of the respondents felt that the findings were of relevance either to them personally or to their organisation. One felt that they were not
- none of the respondents believed that the research led to any changes either to the way they personally approach their work or to the way in which their organisation approaches its work.

Due to then low response rate it is difficult to draw any major conclusions.

Case study - A policy maker

One of the respondents to our survey worked in a policy making capacity for a government department.

He first learned of the project when he was contacted by a researcher and asked to participate in a semi-structured interview. He did so, and on completion of the study, he was invited to participate in a semi-structured interview, and was sent a copy of a discussion paper outlining the key research findings.

He and his organisation did not contribute financially towards the research, nor would they have done so had the ESRC funding not been made available.

He believed that the research findings were of interest to his organisation, as they provided an interesting critique of how targetry is used in public service delivery. However, neither he nor his organisation have made any changes to the way in which they deliver support as a result of the research findings.

Summary

The majority of the researchers we interviewed believed that their research had implications for policy making, and could help to evidence and guide policy makers in their decision making. This view is supported by the rapporteurs comments discussed in section 2. However, there is limited evidence, either from our researcher surveys and our survey of policy makers, to suggest that this potential is being delivered in practice, and there may be implications here for how the research is disseminated in future.

Additionality

Findings from UK research survey

Respondents were asked whether they would have undertaken the research had support from the ESRC not been available. One respondent said that they were unsure while, of the remaining fifteen:

- eight (53 per cent) said that their research would not have proceeded at all without the support
- three (20 per cent) would have done it at a later date, but with the same collaborators
- two (13 per cent) would have done it to a smaller scale, but with the same collaborators
- two (13 per cent) would have done it to a smaller scale with different collaborators.

This level of additionality is very good given that no one would have done the project to the same extent without the support and the fact that over half said they would not have done the research at all demonstrate the importance and value of ERCP in furthering social science research.

Findings from international collaborator survey

Respondents to the international survey were also asked to report whether they would have undertaken the research, had support from their national awarding agency not been made available. Again one respondent was unsure, while of the remaining seven:

- three (43 per cent) said that their research would not have proceeded at all without the support
- three (43 per cent) would have done it to a smaller scale, but with the same collaborators
- one (14 per cent) would have done it to a smaller scale with different collaborators.

As with the UK survey, the levels are an indication of the impact of ERCP and the extent to which research has happened, or been done on a larger scales as a result of the support.

Summary

There is strong evidence of additionality, and none of the projects would have taken place to the same scale and with the same partners in the absence of ESRC's support.

Overall perceptions

ECRP is well regarded across the UK and Europe, with 95 per cent of respondents indicating that they would recommend to another research and the same proportion saying they would apply again if the opportunity arose. The reason for not applying was due to retirement.

“It's the only fund which, to his knowledge, allows for collaborative European projects in responsive mode. All the European Union funding sources tend to be strategic grants where you have to apply against a pre-determined strategic objective”.

“There are no viable alternatives. There is a great need for this type of grants”.

Findings from UK research survey

Overall the vast majority of UK researcher (fourteen of the fifteen that responded) found the programme good or very good.

- six of the sixteen respondents rated ECRP as ‘very good’
- eight rated it as ‘good’
- one rated it as ‘neither good nor poor’
- one chose not to answer the question due to the early stage of their research
- none rated it as “poor” or “very poor”.

Findings from international collaborator survey

As with the UK researchers, European collaborators were equally impressed with the programme, with six of the seven respondents rating good/very good.

- two of the eight respondents rated ECRP as ‘very good’
- four rated it as ‘good’
- one rated it as ‘neither good nor poor’
- one chose not to answer the question due to the early stage of their research
- none rated it as “poor” or “very poor”.

Case study - UK lead researcher

This researcher had an idea for a large scale multi-national project that he had hoped to pursue for some time, but was unable to fund. When the ECRP scheme was introduced, he saw it as a good opportunity to put a team together and take his ideas forward.

His two partners were both friends and colleagues who he had known for some time, but with whom he had never previously worked on funded research.

While the process of securing ESRC funding was straightforward, the decision to fund a second partner was delayed, and the third partner was refused funding. This led to delays in the research, and required him to approach a fourth potential partner in another country, and ask him to put in a further application.

The collaborative nature of the project improved the quality of the research findings, gave them a greater international profile and helped them to get their research into the leading journals. However, it also caused some communications challenges, which became easier over time, and they had to overcome some cultural differences, including different protocols for allocating ‘lead author’ and ‘co-author’ status in different countries.

Case study - UK research partner

This researcher first heard about the programme through a colleague in the Netherlands, who suggested that they should put in a funding application. He found the opportunity appealing as it was a natural fit for other work he was doing, and as it seemed to present

little risk, particularly given the simplicity of the ESRC's application process and the fact that he only sought a small grant.

While the programme offered a unique opportunity for collaborative, pan European research, he experienced some difficulties capturing comparable data for each nation, which caused the studies to become more like a series of individual nation case studies, rather than true international comparisons.

He found the peer review process to be fair and straightforward, though the referee reports tended to be shorted and less detailed than he would normally expect.

Case study - International research partner

This researcher first heard about the programme through a colleague in the UK, who asked her to join her team. She accepted as she saw it as an opportunity to work with other good scholars who she respected on a project that was of mutual interest.

She had a poor experience in the application process when, although her country's research council gave her a verbal assurance that they would fund a project that was approved by the lead applicant's research council. Her application was refused, and her contribution to the work had to be funded through her own university.

In spite of this, she found the process of collaborative working to be a "stimulating, fun and rewarding" experience that aided the professional development of herself and her team.

Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to assess:

- the contribution to UK social science research made by the ESRC supported European Collaborative Research Projects
- the scientific quality and academic impact of the ESRC-funded research supported through the ECRP, and any lessons learned regarding maximising these attributes
- the extent to which international networks were fostered
- the extent to which the investment has had an impact upon policy and practice and any lessons learned regarding maximising the non-academic impact of research
- the relative merits of the ECRP funding mechanism as an avenue for international collaborative funding, providing guidance on future international collaborative funding priorities for the ESRC.

This chapter will summarise our key findings against each of these objectives, before offering recommendations for improving delivery going forward.

Contribution to UK social science research

The project has contributed to UK social science research in a number of ways, including:

- Increased profile of the UK's senior social science researchers: by giving them the opportunity to lead on or co-author major academic research studies with international reach
- Supported the development of emerging researchers: by allowing PhD researchers to support major international research papers, and given them an opportunity to work with and become known by other leading researchers in their field from across Europe
- Increased the profile of UK social science institutions: by producing research papers that contributed to the university department's Research Assessment Exercise submission.

Scientific quality and academic impact of research

The structure of the ECRP programme was conducive to the delivery of high impact, scientifically robust academic research. For example:

- the opportunity for academic researchers to set their own research objectives, rather than having to work within the parameters of a prescribed brief, allowed them directly address issues that they considered of scientific importance
- the international nature of the programme allowed researchers to draw from data sources in different countries, and to carrying out international comparative research that may not have otherwise been possible
- the opportunity for Europe's leading experts to share knowledge, and work collaboratively on projects allowed for a pooling of expertise, and helped the researchers to generate a sufficient critical mass to produce high quality research
- the peer review process provided an objective quality check for the research, without becoming overly burdensome for the participating researchers.

As a result, the programme generated a large number of academic research outcomes, including citations, conference papers and academic publications.

Impact on strength of international networks

In every case that we examined, the lead researcher had a pre-existing professional relationship with at least one of their international collaborators. However, there is evidence to suggest that ECRP has had a major impact on strengthening pre-existing networks, for example by:

- giving academics who had collaborated on project in the past an opportunity to do so again, often on larger and more ambitious projects
- giving academics who had previously collaborated on an informal basis an opportunity to develop a more formal working relationship
- introducing academics to new third parties with whom they could also undertake collaborative research
- providing junior researchers with an introduction to international research collaboration, and increasing their access to leading international experts in their fields.

All of the researchers we interviewed left the programme with a positive attitude towards international collaboration and, with the exception of those who had retired, a desire to collaborate again in the future.

Impacts on policy and practice

All of the researchers we interviewed believed that their research had significant implications for policy makers and practitioners and this view was shared by the rapporteurs. In the majority of cases, had undertaken some form of non-academic dissemination. This included presentations to policy makers and newspaper and magazine articles. In some cases these activities had led to the research being quoted in policy and strategy papers.

However, there is evidence to suggest that researchers may have in some cases over-estimated the impact of their dissemination activities. For example, three of the names organisations identified by researchers as policy beneficiaries of the research reported to us that they had no knowledge of the research taking place. A further nineteen opted not to participate in our survey, while each of the three who did respond reported that they had not made any use of the research findings in their policy making decisions.

Merits of funding mechanism

A substantial majority of survey respondents felt that the ECRP's funding mechanism was well designed and appropriate to their needs. In particular:

- the programme was seen as one of the few funding sources available for investigator driven research. It was therefore seen as a good fit for this gap in the market
- the funding mechanism was considered less bureaucratic than other sources of international collaborative research funding, such as European Union funded schemes, and was often a 'first port of call' for this type of research
- the level of funding made available to researchers was deemed appropriate, and this was not thought to have had any serious adverse bearing on the quality of the research outcomes
- none of the research projects would not been carried out to the same scale, and with the same collaborators without the programme, and half of the programmes would not have taken place at all.

However, survey respondents did have some issues around the processes used to take the funding decisions, including:

- Differences in application processes between each of the national research councils: which added a layer of bureaucracy and confusion to the application process.
- Differences in the award decision making timescales between each of the national research councils: which led to some of the research projects being delayed.
- The requirement for three applications to be accepted in order for the research to proceed: in some cases researchers addressed this by adding in a fourth or fifth applicant to the application as a form of security. However this may have diluted the value of the research .
- The possibility of the lead researcher being refused funding: this only occurred in one instance in our sample, however it placed a significant administrative burden on each of the supporting researchers, who were required to assume management and co-ordination responsibilities for the project.

Other conclusions

Other key conclusions to emerge from this research are:

- A Lack of support infrastructure for management and administration of projects: in many cases, the lead researcher had little prior experience of managing and administering a large scale, multi-national research project of this nature. The lead researchers were, in some instances, able to draw on support from their own institutions to address this, however this was not always the case.
- Becoming easier with modern technology: while the process of maintaining regular communication between researchers across international boundaries was seen as a challenge by many researchers, and particular those involved in the programme early on, recent improvements in teleconferencing, video-conferencing and file sharing technology have made this significantly easier in recent years, with these improvements expected to continue into the future.

Recommendations

Based on the findings from this research, we recommend:

1. investigator driver, international collaborative research should be allowed to continue - the ECRP filled a clearly recognised 'gap in the market' for this form of research and, without the programme, some forms of comparative international academic research with policy value would not be carried out
2. need for better international co-ordination - more can be done to co-ordinate the activities of the participating research councils, including the adoption of consistent application forms, consistent bid assessment timescales, and collective bid scoring
3. need for better support infrastructure - many of the researchers would benefit from a central resource within the research funding organisation offering for project management and administration support
4. need for better dissemination - the ESRC could play a greater role in assisting researchers with the dissemination of their research to policy makers and practitioners, this may include the organisation of dissemination events, the issuing of press releases to publicise the findings of ESRC funded research or the provision of an advice and support service to assist researchers in their own dissemination activities.