International Benchmarking Review of UK Sociology
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Foreword

The UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the Heads and Professors of Sociology (HAPS) and the British Sociological Association (BSA) agreed in 2008 to work in partnership to benchmark the quality and impact of research in the UK against international standards. This is the fourth in a series of ESRC sponsored assessments covering major social science disciplines in the UK.

A Steering Group, chaired by the then BSA President and the Chair of HAPS, joined by prominent UK academics, research users and funders, was formed to initiate and oversee the review. The Group appointed a distinguished International Panel, chaired by Professor Helga Nowotny (WWTF Vienna, then Vice-President, currently President, of the European Research Council), to make an independent qualitative assessment of the UK's performance in this discipline and to report on its findings. Steering Group members are listed in Annex 2, and International Panel Members on page 6.

On behalf of the partnership we warmly welcome this thorough, rigorous and challenging assessment of the state of Sociology in the UK, and believe that the review will be highly beneficial, and will have significant impact. We welcome the Panel's conclusion that UK Sociology demonstrates the highest standards of intellectual performance and research output. We endorse the Panel's views on the distinctiveness of the UK discipline in terms of diversity of research and interdisciplinary orientation. We also endorse the report's emphasis on the impact that Sociology has on policy and practice, both in the UK and abroad. This is testimony to the expertise and enthusiasm of scholars at all levels of the discipline, as well as to the work UK academics put into knowledge transfer activities and engagement with end users.

The report's recommendations will be considered fully. Where weaknesses and other issues of concern have been identified the organisations concerned will work together to address them. We hope that the report will be debated by all those with an interest in the development of Sociology in the UK, and that it will provide a focus for developing the enormous contribution described by the International Panel.

We wish to extend our sincere thanks to Professor Nowotny and all of the Panel Members for their hard work in producing such an illuminating and insightful report. We would also like to thank all those who discussed their work with the Panel or contributed in any way to the review.

Professor Ian Diamond, Chief Executive, Economic and Social Research Council  
Professor Sue Scott, President (2007-2009), British Sociological Association  
Professor John Holmwood, Chair, Heads and Professors of Sociology

March 2010
Executive Summary

(1) The Panel’s remit was to benchmark the current position of UK sociological research against the best world- wide, highlighting strengths and weaknesses as appropriate. It was also asked to look at capacity issues and at impact issues, and to consider the future of the discipline. Our main conclusion is that sociology in the UK is in a healthy state, intellectually vibrant and endowed with the capacity to respond vigorously to current and future challenges. Given our admittedly high standards that few, if any, other national sociologies would meet, we attest UK sociology to be at the international forefront with its intellectual performance and research output.

(2) UK sociology has kept and continues to develop a large diversity of research and intellectual strands. Its intellectual distinctiveness is characterized by a dual focus: a relatively strong interdisciplinary orientation and a considerable degree of internal pluralism which catalyses work within traditional sociology departments and within thematic sub-fields, some more classical, others more recent. This combination makes for a rare openness to new ideas and a capacity to innovate. The theoretical scope and methodological sophistication in the ‘mixed methods approach’ of UK sociology has been able to accommodate multiple points of view and research approaches.

(3) On the institutional side, UK sociology is marked by being perceived as an ‘exporter discipline’ with the boundaries between a sociological, although not well-defined, ‘core’ and the various sub-fields in flux. Issues of top-down vs. bottom-up interdisciplinarity, the quality of postgraduate training, and how to increase the visibility of the ‘core’, are therefore issues in need of special attention in order to map intellectual distinctiveness with institutional/administrative structure in an optimal way.

(4) The Panel found many overall strengths in the sub-fields which it explored in some depth. UK scholarship has been very influential world-wide in a number of fields, in particular STS and cultural sociology. It has attained a distinctive profile and high international visibility in areas like education, health and medical research and women’s and gender studies and social theory.

(5) While maintaining strengths in areas that are doing well is clearly important, the position (and tradition) of UK sociology as a “Third Culture”1 and the prevalence of a ‘mixed methods’ approach call for additional efforts to bring quantitative research methods into closer alignment with institutional and state-of-the-art standards.

(6) UK sociology is undoubtedly one of the leading traditions with an international profile and influence. The claim of UK sociology exerting a major influence around the world is fully sustained by the Panel. The continuing attractiveness of UK universities and the strength of UK publishers and journals offer additional advantages that benefit sociology and are well utilized. However, the Panel would like to increase awareness within UK sociology to be well prepared in view of increasing international competition.

(7) In terms of intellectual and institutional capacities, UK sociology has much to offer. The Panel was impressed by the liveliness of the intellectual communities of PhD students it met, but also somewhat concerned about the position of early researchers (although still attractive in a comparative perspective), as it was about the effects of the concentration of doctoral training and the trend towards the separation of teaching from research.

(8) Impact issues occupy a central position in the UK research landscape in general and in sociology in particular. The Panel encountered repeatedly two different definitions, interpretations and meanings associated with ‘impact’. Although these differences and their consequences are not unique to sociology, the Panel nevertheless could not fail to notice some of the distorting effect of the past RAE on the discipline. While these effects may be the result of ‘merely’ administrative design and procedures, they nevertheless are real and of considerable concern for us.

1 For current purposes, we take this to refer only to sociology’s unique placement between the natural sciences on one side, and literature and the humanities on the other.
Looking towards the future of UK sociology as a discipline, the Panel sees a challenge in balancing the, on the whole productive, tensions that are inherent in its position as a Third Culture and in protecting its disciplinary ‘core’ while maintaining its intellectual openness in the context of the ongoing globalisation of the discipline.

Our recommendations summarize what follows from the overall position of UK sociology in an international perspective and from its distinctive character as a Third Culture. Its strengths are foremost a very high level in the intellectual standards of its research performance, based on pluralism, interdisciplinarity within the discipline and openness to new ideas. It compares extremely well in a wider international frame as, perhaps, being second only to the US. However, in order to maintain these strengths, and in view of a growing internationally competitive climate in higher education in general, we recommend:

- strengthening the institutional organization of sociology as a discipline while preserving its intellectual diversity
- bringing sociological research methodologies in closer alignment with institutional and international state-of-the-art standards
- providing incentives for developing international cooperation, training and comparative research
- defining ‘impact measures’ and criteria to maximize the actual societal impacts of sociology
- enhancing sociology’s academic and public standing by reinforcing its visibility and authority
Although the objective of the review was to benchmark the current position of UK sociological research against the best world-wide, only a few reliable and sufficiently robust elements and data exist for a genuine international comparison. One of them, a bibliometric comparative survey, turned out to be less useful than anticipated, since it excludes books and book chapters and has a rather narrow scope of reference countries. The Panel had therefore to rely more than it wished on the admittedly selective, but nevertheless broadly based, international expertise of its members. In its methodology, the Panel drew heavily on the detailed knowledge of its members of a wide range of different national sociologies, including knowledge of their different institutional structures and funding systems and on considerable in-depth knowledge of European research cooperation, in addition to the more specialized expertise of Panel members which covered a good part of the thematic research areas under review.

The Panel addressed the overall situation of UK sociology and its contributions outside the research submitted within the RAE evaluation. We received copious documentary evidence from a variety of different sources, including nine overviews of various substantive research fields. During the Panel’s visit to the UK twenty meetings were held in London and Glasgow with a total of 122 researchers, students and users of research. These discussions and the evaluation of the documentary evidence were preceded and followed by intense discussions within the Panel.

The Panel’s brief explicitly included the highlighting of strengths and weaknesses, in relation to the distinctive features of UK sociology in general, and to nine, more specialized areas in particular. This double focus necessarily brought to the fore several strategic issues that are currently under intense discussion and of vital importance for the future of the discipline. Our discussion of these strategic, and partly problematic, issues should not distract from giving credit to the vast number of strengths that we also see and wish to acknowledge. Nor do we want to give the unwarranted impression that the Panel is concerned about a number of problems in certain areas, while others receive little notice. We also wish to note that Social Policy is scheduled for a separate review. Our remarks on this field are therefore meant to be more of an illustrative nature.

Our overall assessment attests to UK sociology as internationally widely visible and influential, intellectually and institutionally distinctive and possessing a strong profile with many areas of particular strength. The problems we have identified are, in our view, largely due to the lack of adequate institutional support and/or underfunding in the present higher education environment. By listening attentively to our discussion partners and through careful scrutiny of the documentary evidence, we may have been drawn, perhaps inadvertently, into some of the ongoing discussions internal to these broader issues. It was not our task, nor our intention, to ‘fault’ anyone, let alone the discipline, for some of the problems or strategic issues that surfaced. Not raising them, however, would have amounted to turning a blind, or at least a bland, eye on stating our views of UK sociology.

The timing of the review coincided with other heavy demands in higher education and not everything we heard and saw is necessarily representative of the wider field. We took note that our discussions with User Groups was limited to a half-day meeting and therefore does not include the views of other users which would merit a study of its own.

We had to give space, perhaps more than warranted, to what we take to be the distortive effects of the past RAE on this discipline. While these effects may be the result of ‘merely’ administrative design and procedures, they nevertheless are real and of great concern to us.

Last but not least, we hope that our recommendations will be taken up in the spirit in which they are offered, namely as a contribution to an ongoing policy debate whose outcome will be critical in shaping the future of the discipline.
1. Introduction

1.1 Background to the review

1.1.1 An international benchmark of UK sociology
In 2008, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the British Sociological Association (BSA) and the Heads and Professors of Sociology (HAPS) agreed to form a partnership in order to internationally benchmark the quality and impact of UK Sociology. This was the fourth in a series of such reviews, planned by the ESRC to be taken forward in partnership with appropriate professional bodies in the UK. Reviews of Social Anthropology (2006), Politics and International Studies (2007) and Economics (2008) have already been undertaken and reports published on the ESRC website.

The review process was managed by a Steering Group composed of senior academics, funders and research users, jointly chaired by Professor John Holmwood (University of Nottingham, Chair of HAPS) and Professor Sue Scott (Glasgow Caledonian University, outgoing President of the BSA). The Steering Group appointed an International Panel of eminent sociologists, chaired by Professor Helga Nowotny (WWTF Vienna, Vice-President of the European Research Council), to make an independent assessment of the UK’s performance and to report on its findings. Members of the steering group are listed in Annex 2. International Panel members are listed at 1.1.3 below.

The review took place following the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). The review partners were careful to ensure that there was no overlap between the review and this exercise. This goal was easily achieved as the purposes of these activities were very different. In particular, the benchmarking review assessed the international standing and contribution of the discipline as a whole and did not make judgements about individual departments.

1.1.2 Terms of Reference
The object of the review was to benchmark the current position of UK sociological research against the best done world-wide, highlighting strengths and weaknesses as appropriate. The review covered all sociological research in the UK, not just ESRC research or work from specific departments, and the review report does not compare departments with one another. It thus addresses the overall situation of UK sociology and contributions to it outside the research submitted within Sociology Units of Assessment at the RAE.

The Panel’s report was required to cover research quality; research capacity; and research impact. The exact nature of the criteria used to assess these areas were very different. In particular, the benchmarking review assessed the international standing and contribution of the discipline as a whole and did not make judgements about individual departments.

The Panel were required to draw on a range of evidence to make their assessment of UK sociology, including:

- Panel Visit to the UK – to hold a series of meetings with senior academics from the discipline, postgraduate students, and non-academic users of UK sociological research.
- Demographic and Research Income Data – The Panel were supplied with a range of demographic data relating to the UK discipline, as well as recent research income figures including European funding.
- Submissions from the Discipline – The Panel commissioned research overviews of particular areas within the UK discipline, citing areas of strength, weaknesses and examples of key research outputs and impacts.
- Bibliometric Data – The Panel were supplied with a range of bibliometric indicators that compare the productivity and impact of UK Sociology research outputs with others internationally.
- Non-academic Research User Survey – A survey of non-academic users of research was conducted. This included policy-makers, practitioners and others outside academia that utilise UK sociological research.

Within its overall remit, the Panel was required to conduct its work and reach its conclusions independently of the review sponsors or any other interest group. The Panel’s formal reporting path was to the Review Steering Group.
The Panel noted that its report is expected to be used by the review sponsors both to demonstrate the impact and standing of the UK discipline, in order to maintain and strengthen its funding base, and to help the profession, funders and other stakeholders identify ways of enhancing performance and capacity, and promote future research agendas.

1.1.3 Panel Members
Professor Helga Nowotny (Chair), Vice-President, European Research Council, WWTF Vienna, Austria
Professor Philip J Cook, Duke University, US
Professor Mary Darmanin, University of Malta, Malta
Professor James A Davis, University of Chicago, US
Professor Satish Deshpande, Delhi University, India
Professor Patricia Hill Collins, University of Maryland, US
Professor Patrick Le Galès, Sciences Po Paris, CNRS Centre d’Etudes Européennes, France
Professor Anssi Peräkylä, University of Helsinki, Finland
Professor Judith Stacey, New York University, US

Unfortunately, Professor Davis had to withdraw from the Panel, due to ill health, and was not able to join the other members on the visit to the UK. The Panel wishes to thank Professor Davis for his valuable early input.

1.2 Summary of the review process

1.2.1 Documentary Evidence
The Panel considered a wide range of documentary evidence, set out in Annex 1. All Heads of UK sociology departments from the list maintained by HAPS were invited to make short submissions to the Panel, giving an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of UK sociology, a description of how their departments fit within this picture, their views of the health of the discipline, including training and capacity issues, and any other issues that it was judged important for the Panel to be aware of. Ninety-nine invitations were issued and twenty-four submissions were received.

Similar submissions were invited from fourteen learned societies and journals. Four submissions were received from societies or journals and representatives of a further six contributed to discussion sessions.

The Panel also commissioned nine ‘overviews’ of various substantive or ‘topic’ areas, which tied in to dedicated discussion sessions with UK experts held during the visit. These were: Education, Health and Medical Sociology, Social Policy, Science and Technology Studies, Research Methods, Economic Sociology, Cultural Sociology, Gender and Women’s Studies, and Social Theory. Rationales for selecting these areas varied; discussion of the state of work in theory and methods was regarded as indispensible; education, economic sociology, and gender and women’s studies were areas noted by the Sociology RAE Sub-Panel as underrepresented in submissions by Sociology units of assessment, with a tendency for sociological research in these areas to be ‘exported’ to other units of assessment; the Panel considered there to be good grounds to take health and medical research and social policy as similar areas; while cultural sociology and science and technology studies were both flagged as major growth areas by the Sociology RAE Sub-Panel. For background, the Panel also commissioned an overview of the historical development of the UK discipline.

As noted above, a demographic and funding review, a bibliometric survey and a survey of non-academic users of sociological research were also commissioned. The Panel was informed that bibliometric surveys currently do not include books nor book chapters. Although we asked for an additional survey of book publications, this was technically not feasible. The bibliometric survey at our disposition was therefore limited in its usefulness and also rather limited with regard to the countries that served as reference.

2 The review specifically did not cover the discipline of social policy, which will be benchmarked in a later review. The Panel’s aim in this case was to assess the interaction between sociology and social policy as disciplines and the impact of sociological research on policy.
The Panel did not receive any specific documentation regarding the proposed Doctoral Training Centres and Doctoral Training Units. The Panel was therefore not in a position to explore this pressing issue although it was raised in discussions by Heads of Departments and representatives of other groups. It is regrettable that this prevents us including this topic in our recommendations.

The finite resources available necessitated prioritisation and the Panel was not able to consider all the substantive areas covered by UK sociology. Two examples of gaps in the Panel's coverage, for differing reasons, were the Sociology of Religion, where an enduring UK research strength is internationally recognised, and Criminology, where a separation from the 'parent discipline', similar to that of other sub-fields, has been substantially effected.

1.2.2 Visit to the UK

The Panel's visit to the UK took place between 5-9 October 2009. Twenty meetings were held, in London and Glasgow, with a total of 122 researchers, students and users of research. The Panel split into sub-groups and agreed chairs for these meetings, with the chairs reporting back, initially verbally and later in writing, to the full Panel.

The Panel held four meetings with heads, or senior representatives, of UK sociology departments. Forty-eight department heads were invited; approximating to a 50% sample, structured to include representation from the full range of UK institution types, of which fourteen had not submitted to the Sociology Panel for RAE 2008. Thirty-eight representatives attended the meetings, with representatives from one Russell Group, four ‘post-1960s’ and five ‘post-1992’ universities unable to accept the invitation.

Nine meetings dedicated to particular areas, as above, were held with field experts, invited by the ESRC in consultation with the Review Steering Group, including editors of field journals and representatives of learned societies.

The Panel held a meeting at each location with research students and with early career researchers and, in London, held meetings with users of sociological research from national and local government, and from the private and third sectors. A randomly selected sample of invited department heads were also invited to nominate an appropriate departmental colleague to attend the meetings with early career researchers; similarly, a smaller sample was invited to nominate research students in their departments, this group supplemented by a group randomly selected from among current ESRC research students excluding, for practical reasons, those nearing completion dates for their theses. The consultants commissioned to conduct the survey of research users included a question on whether respondents would be willing to attend a meeting with the Panel; all answering yes were invited, and a number of additional invitations were sent to individuals on a contact list maintained by the ESRC's Knowledge Transfer team.

For its meetings with representatives of UK Sociology Departments, the Panel achieved a reasonably representative sample of types of institution although, as noted above, attendance was lower than hoped, particularly from smaller departments, which may simply reflect relatively greater pressure on staff resources. The number of responses to the invitation to make written submissions, which was extended to all UK Sociology Departments was, however, disappointing. This may, to some extent, have reflected logistical difficulties arising from the need to arrange these and other inputs over the summer holiday period. However, the Panel do not consider that the schedule, with invitations first issued in June for an initial deadline of late August, subsequently revised to late September, and following the circulation of two reminders from the ESRC project team and one from the joint Chairs of the Review Steering Group, could reasonably be seen as posing severe difficulties.

The decision to ask department heads to nominate research students and early career researchers to meet the Panel probably meant that the individuals the Panel met were not fully representative of their respective peer groups, although without detracting from the usefulness of the discussions.

It was not possible, given the Panel's resources, to attempt a representative sample of research users; these sessions were therefore approached, successfully, as a means of adding depth and richness to the findings of the user review.
For contributors to the sessions on substantive research areas, the Panel sought expertise, rather than representativeness, and invited attendees on this basis as advised by the joint Chairs of the Steering Group.

1.2.3 The Panel’s approach to gathering evidence during its visit to the UK
Although discussion in all meetings was wide ranging, the Panel took care to ensure consistency of questioning. Issues raised through questioning included research quality, international perspectives, the quality of postgraduate training, the future of UK sociology and emerging fields of study. Early career researchers and research students were also questioned on the diversity of the discipline, their personal experiences, choices and career prospects and plans.

Attendees at meetings were informed in advance of the areas that the Panel would like to discuss and, at their first private meeting, the Panel members developed more detailed questions within these general areas. These lists of questions agreed by the Panel for their meetings with departmental representatives, early career researchers, students and field experts are provided in Annex 3, although it should be noted that these are working, rather than formal, documents.

As anticipated, discussion of cross-cutting issues of impact and of public sociology arose in all meetings without need for specific prompting.
2. **Research Issues**

2.1 **Distinctiveness of UK sociology**

As a discipline, sociology has a recognizable conceptual approach, distinctive methods, and an evolving research agenda. The conceptual approach that is unique to sociology starts with an assumption that individuals, groups, cultures, institutions, and their interaction can be usefully addressed as the direct objects of study - that it is not necessary or even necessarily productive to analyze them as the aggregations of individual actors (which is the economic perspective that has had so much influence on social science). Distinctive methods associated with sociology are both quantitative, e.g. social surveys, models of population dynamics (from a demographic perspective), network analysis; and qualitative methods, e.g. interviews, ethnographies etc. Sociology’s traditional agenda has focused on the study of social structure, with special attention to themes such as power, bureaucracy, social inequalities, social problems and social relationships.

This disciplinary core has been expressed in a variety of ways that reflects sociology’s unique placement between the natural sciences on one side, and literature and the humanities on the other. Different national traditions demonstrate particular ways of grappling with this “Third Culture” position. Wolf Lepenies describes the distinctive pre-World War II path of sociology in Great Britain as follows: “While in countries like France and Germany sociology developed with sharp, albeit different profiles as a science of opposition and legitimation…sociology in England simply was part of social common sense; it was not necessary to protect it as an autonomous, academic discipline”\(^3\). At the same time, this tradition was also based upon systematic empirical research and pioneering data gathering about life conditions of the working class in particular.

When sociology in Great Britain became more firmly institutionalised after World War II, the efforts to specify sociological boundaries also became more pronounced. Yet the distinctive nature of sociology as a “Third Culture” is a legacy whose influence continues until this day. In the following section on Selected Thematic Areas within UK Sociology: Strengths and Weaknesses we refer to conflicting tendencies, both of an intellectual and an institutional kind, that oscillate between greater autonomy in the profiles of various sub-fields and the elusive, but recurrent search for ‘core(s)’ from which a stronger disciplinary identity could be derived. In this section, we briefly summarize these intellectual and institutional dimensions and sketch out possible implications of the connections between them in shaping the distinctiveness of UK sociology.

2.1.1 **Intellectual distinctiveness**

In the view of the Panel, British sociology is intellectually innovative and very lively. It has kept and continues to develop a large diversity of research and intellectual strands, some classic (education, religion), some more recent (STS, cultural sociology linked to social mobility and globalisation). It remains very vibrant intellectually both overall as a discipline and in many sub-fields. By comparison to other national sociologies, the capacity for new developments and intellectual innovation remains very high. UK sociology has been able to ask new questions and to explore new and original avenues for research. The sophistication of social theory and theoretically informed empirical work remains outstanding in comparative terms. In institutional terms, sociology departments are seen from the inside and the outside as providing an excellent research environment, open to a remarkable diversity of background, methods, subjects, and nationalities. This open intellectual environment fostering research development is surely a strength of British sociology. The capacity to welcome students and colleagues from all over the world gives it a distinctive intellectual flavour.

Viewed from outside, UK sociology does not appear to be particularly intellectually fragmented. As a discipline, it retains a recognizable identity organized particularly around theoretically-informed empirical research. Responding to new intellectual opportunities, sociology has differentiated into distinctive, interdisciplinary sub-fields that seemingly have not (yet) diminished the capacity of theory and methods as central to the field.

At the same time, the administrative location of sociology within the institutional structures in traditional disciplinary units as well as in various multi-disciplinary schools has resulted in a fragmented disciplinary identity for many sociologists. During our visit we found that sociologists who focused on the intellectual content of UK sociology were less worried about issues of disciplinary fragmentation and the potential loss of a sociological core; whereas, those who focused more on the institutional organization of the discipline expressed far more concern about questions of interdisciplinary, fuzzy borders and sociology’s status as an “exporter discipline”.4

UK sociology is characterized by a dual focus: a relatively strong interdisciplinary orientation and a considerable degree of internal pluralism which seemingly catalyses a vibrancy among researchers who work either within traditional sociology departments, or within thematic programmes outside of sociology departments, as well researchers who work outside academia. This internal pluralism and strong interdisciplinary focus militates against any fixed definition of sociology itself. As one respondent observed, sociology is “not focused institutionally, but rather sociology is a set of practices.”

Pluralism, Interdisciplinarity and Openness to New Ideas: One distinguishing feature that emerged is the openness to and incorporation of new ideas. Many different segments of the research community, even those in very challenging institutional locations, e.g. early career researchers worried about long term job prospects, or postgraduate students concerned whether they would ever get jobs as researchers, identified this intellectual openness as something that they valued about UK sociology. Faculty in specific thematic areas and heads of departments seemed to agree that the theoretical scope and methodological sophistication of UK sociology writ large has been able to accommodate multiple points of view and research approaches.

This openness is best exemplified through British sociology’s explicit embrace of interdisciplinarity. Sociology’s connections to neighbouring disciplines have undergone considerable change, partly reflecting the rise of new opportunities and challenges. As one head of department put it, “sociology connects to its neighbouring disciplines extremely well, and can now be seen to provide methodological and theoretical foundation options for many of them”. The trajectory of cultural sociology illustrates particularly well the ongoing shifts in theory and method that give UK sociology its distinctive intellectual flavour.

Respect Given to Theory and Methods: Another distinctive feature lies in the respect given to social theory that permeates empirical work, and a commitment to multiple (“mixed”) methods that can be deployed to address newly emerging themes or concerns that are theoretically informed.

Far less agreement about what constitutes the intellectual ‘core’ of sociology in terms of conceptual approach, distinctive methods and research agenda or whether such a question was important or valid surfaced. This is certainly not unique to British sociology, but remained a constant theme.

2.1.2 Institutional distinctiveness
This dual focus on external interdisciplinarity and internal pluralism takes several distinct institutional forms. Institutional structures both facilitate the benefits of internal pluralism and an interdisciplinary orientation, but also limit their effectiveness, ironically, often by claiming to support them.

Sociology as an Exporter Discipline: On the surface, internal pluralism and an interdisciplinary orientation can be a good thing. But in a situation where “sociology can mean different things to different people,” this presents institutional challenges. The ‘core’ seems less secure than in other disciplines, yet the feeling of a need to protect it

4 According to Wakeling there were 1320 FTE staff in Sociology UoAs and 3,670 staff overall (ie including other UoAs) considered as sociologists (by their highest degree). Paradoxically, only 610 of the 1,320 staff in Sociology UoAs are classed as sociologist by this definition. This demonstrates that those not formally trained in the discipline are able to nevertheless join it, so it may be seen as much as an ‘attractor’ as an ‘exporter’.
was not widely shared. Some respondents identified with their thematic area of interest instead. The result is “drift” into topics that might be attractive, but do not necessarily strengthen sociology. We shall return to these tensions in section 5.

Employment Prospects for Researchers: The need to find jobs is a major institutional factor fuelling sociology’s status as an exporter discipline. Interdisciplinary thematic areas create job opportunities for sociologists. Work in fields such as economic sociology, education, cultural studies and social policy frequently (and in some cases, typically) does not take place in sociology departments. For many research students, applied interdisciplinary fields appeared equally attractive as academic work in sociology departments. The internal pluralism within sociology that lends itself to interdisciplinary work thus increased the otherwise daunting job prospects faced by this population. The interviewees said that they could search for employment in fields like urban studies, schools of education or health. Sociology as an exporter discipline may be problematic, but it is seen as beneficial for employment prospects.

2.1.3 Some implications of the intellectual and institutional distinctiveness

Top-down vs. Bottom-up Interdisciplinarity: Not surprisingly, whenever interdisciplinarity is voluntary and a bottom-up enterprise, it is well received and flourishes. In contrast, when it is mandated and linked to broader, top-down bureaucratic initiatives, it garners far less support. Several respondents indicated that the planned University-wide Doctoral Centres, sites of mandated interdisciplinary scholarship, might actually undermine the vibrancy of interdisciplinary work and some saw this initiative as producing sites for generic research methods that might lead to a degree of blandness. Similarly, Women’s Studies has always been an interdisciplinary, bottom-up field that bridges and cross-fertilizes social sciences and humanities. However, new top down policies that may force a split between social sciences and the humanities were seen as potentially stifling and harmful to Women’s Studies. Early career researchers expressed a special concern with top-down treatments of interdisciplinarity, much of it stemming from their perceptions of ESRC funding mandates and the RAE process. They could see that interdisciplinarity was important for ESRC funding, but that this interdisciplinarity posed problems regarding where to place subsequent publications in RAE exercises (e.g., expecting publication to be in Sociology Journals, even if these were less open to interdisciplinary work). While these challenges were seen to be endemic of the UK funding and research requirements across disciplines, Sociology was perceived as having difficulties in accommodating them.

Lack of Reciprocity Among Sub-fields and Sociology: Not all parts of the sociological diaspora find these arrangements equally beneficial, especially in view of the potential weakening of the ‘core’ of sociology. There may be intellectual cross-fertilization among sociology and its related thematic areas, but the institutional organization of these relationships is not reciprocal. Sociology may end up servicing other areas without sufficient recognition of this function or returns to its investment.

Ironically, the export of sociology into thematic areas that are interdisciplinary suggests that sociological research within sociological departments may be weakened, eventually narrowing the range of interdisciplinary work itself.

Quality of Postgraduate Training and Potential Effects on Sociological Sub-fields: One important challenge facing sociology concerns the quality of postgraduate training within disciplines and interdisciplinary areas that have benefitted from sociological export, lack of continuity in the training of postgraduate students and the growing remoteness of the sub-fields. We recognize that this diffuseness may over time even erase disciplinary boundaries and that this may create problems of professional identity, especially for more junior researchers. For now, receiving solid training in a sociology department should be sufficient for equipping future researchers to pursue excellent work in an applied setting. If, however, training is moved entirely into the institutional setting of, e.g. a school of business or of education, or a generic Doctoral Training Centre, it will become different from training received in a sociology department.
The crucial question thus becomes how far the intellectual and institutional distinctiveness can be allowed to drift from each other, without irreversible change to the relation between sociology and interdisciplinary sub-fields. Would increasing the visibility of the sociological core offer a solution? Or should a solid training in sociology at the undergraduate level be strengthened?

*Increasing the Visibility of the Sociological ‘Core’:* As one Head of Department (HoD) report pointed out, “the ‘rebranding’ of several types of sociological research under other titles has at times left sociological research looking less dynamic than it really is and posing a narrow conception of sociological research as the ‘real’ Sociology. The challenge for Sociology is in many ways to be properly appreciated for the broad contribution it is already making.” Another HoD report identified the significance of increasing the visibility of the sociological core: “developments in cultural studies, human geography and so forth together with a strong interdisciplinary ethos have contributed to a sense of identity crisis within the discipline. This can be seen in the ways which the biological sciences, for example, pose significant challenges to sociological forms of social inquiry as well as concerns about the cutting-edge methodological capacity of Sociology.”

The expansion of what counts as the “social” has resulted in a broadening of sociology’s terrain, but raises the question how sociology’s distinctive combination of theory, methods, incorporation of new ideas, and a commitment to interdisciplinarity might enhance its ability to study the social. Sociology’s claim over the social is increasingly becoming questioned, especially from newly emerging fields or new trends that have appeared. Thus, the emergence of visual sociology and its interest the use of new media technologies lend themselves well to re-examining social issues and other dimensions of the social world. From an STS perspective, the ‘social’ as a central category is being questioned by emphasizing its continuous co-production with natural and technological processes and entities. Medical sociology, sociology of the body, the environment, historical sociology and parts of social theory grapple in productive ways with a renewed emphasis and redefinition of the ‘social/sociological.

In the following section Selected Thematic Areas: Strengths and Weakness, we appraise how far sub-fields have contributed to this distinctive sociological identity and where obstacles exist which detract from it. Ideally, there should be productive and reciprocally informed exchange between the sub-fields and theoretical and methodological ‘cores’, and depending on where one stands, the assessment of the actual situation is bound to vary.

### 2.2 Selected thematic areas in UK sociology: strengths and weaknesses

The Panel was asked to look at research strengths and weaknesses of UK sociology as seen through a number of substantive fields. As mentioned in 1.2.1 it was not possible to cover the entire research spectrum. The composite accounts below draw on source material from the commissioned nine ‘overviews’ and other background papers as well as from collapsing major themes arising from focus group discussion with Heads of Department, Thematic Expert Panels, Non-Academic (policy and business) Users, Early Career Researcher, Research Student Panels and our own deliberations as an International Panel.

#### 2.2.1 Education

The field has addressed fundamental and comprehensive issues of the role of education in society; the workings of educational institutions (audit cultures, area-based initiatives, curriculum evaluation); persistent inequalities of education in access and outcome across intersectional categories; and the reciprocally constitutive effects of national, supranational and global policies on school and classroom processes and products. There have been notable achievements in globalisation, governance and the knowledge economy (including in Higher Education); social mobility; transitions from school to work; gender and education; disability studies (including a strong advocacy role), education policy-making; school composition effects and achievement. This work has been underpinned by, and has developed, methodological expertise, especially in qualitative research methods. It has been published in top, including international, mainly education, research journals. With varied dissemination modes and submissions to devolved Parliaments, Department for Children, Schools and Families, Equalities, Children’s, Employment and Skills Commissioners, amongst others, the field is recuperating its ‘public sociology’ profile.
The main weakness is its almost exclusive location in Schools of Education, which at the same time offers benefits, such as embeddedness in the field of practice communities. Pushed in two directions, however, away from mainstream sociology departments, as well as away from Initial Teacher Education courses and students, it has been unable to flourish as a sociology (of education) rather than sociologically-led educational research. It is fair to say that the work of these researchers, including work on school audit cultures, geographies of schooling, boys’ masculinities, identity and embodiment studies (e.g. anorexic girls), and adult education amongst others has largely been ignored by mainstream sociologists. The last BSA conference on education took place in 1970 and the ‘cultural turn’ has moved large sections of it away from measurement to deconstruction. Given the demographic profile, there may soon be few disciplinary specialists in education studies and sociology of education. Dependency on government funding has led, in some cases, to a problematic close identification with agendas set elsewhere. Ironically, this has not always led to greater take up of the research, which is used selectively to inform the policy field. The diversity of the work makes it hard to see its cumulative impact. Together, these factors contribute to the present ‘fragility’. There are indications, however, that the sub-field may make a high-profile come back, for example, through the National Equality Panel’s work, with a major interest in the education/inequality relation, where three of eight Panel members are from sociology/economics of education.

2.2.2 Health and Medical Research
This is a vital field with much exciting, mainly empirical research. A lot of it has been generated through ESRC projects on innovative health technologies, health variation, stem cell and genomics research. Health technologies research includes exciting work on the economics of body parts, how health technologies are produced and used by diverse actors (new ‘sick roles’). Compared to the US, the UK focus on health inequalities has concentrated around social class, though there is now work on both, gender and ethnicity and health. The field’s health, illness or health care focus is well represented in a number of ESRC Projects.

All of these have generated major publications that provide theoretical contributions through analysis of changes in biomedicine (partly overlapping with STS), and its relation to the State, introducing, for instance, the concept of biological citizenship.

This field’s two major journals, *Sociology of Health and Illness* and *Social Science and Medicine*, are extremely high ranking; the former, 6th out of 99 world sociology journals, the latter, rated by Thomson ISI as the world’s most cited social science journal for 1997-2007. New journals *Health, Risk and Society* (since 2000) and *Social Theory and Health* (2003) indicate new foci, as well as the continuation of the strong qualitative tradition. The field continues to provide interesting, and accessible, studies at the social level. It has contributed to the parent discipline through its Foucauldian studies, actor network theory (taken over from STS), interactionism, sociology of the professions and of organisations, study of risk, emotions and the body, theories of scientific knowledge production (again, with STS) and bioethics. Less of this work than anticipated was submitted to the Sociology UoA, suggesting some possible incompatibility with institutional demands that submissions to the RAE be large, but organised in relation to the administrative categories of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE).

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9 New Dynamics of Aging, Science in Society, Public Services, Identities and Social Action, and Lifecourse and Lifestyle amongst others.

10 RAE 2008, UoA 41. Subject Overview Report –Main Panel J Overview
Some weakness results from the divide between a quantitative (epidemiological) and qualitative (interpretive) work. Health and medical sociologists with a predominantly qualitative orientation have sometimes had to accept marginal roles in large medical research teams, as the lack of strong quantitative skills renders them unable to take principal investigator (PI) roles. On the other hand, there is an increasing demand for the qualitative skills of sociologists which ensures some leading roles in significant UK biomedical teams. However, opportunities to collaborate on large projects, including international ones, may be harder to obtain with this profile. In our background material, concern for the neglect of the ‘societal’ or political economy of health and health care systems level\(^\text{11}\) of analysis was also expressed. There are signs, however, that new research is addressing this challenge in important areas such as health policy/governance studies, aging studies, the study of epidemics, and climate change.

### 2.2.3 Social Policy

Although social policy is recognised by ESRC as a separate subject area and will be undergoing its own review exercise, significant research on social policy continues to be done by sociologists in sociology departments. Major research themes include: urban environments and the transformations in social relations of cities; personal life, social identities and social marginalisation, including aging and disability; welfare, welfare regimes, employment and social inclusion; crime, culture and control; poverty, wealth and social class.

One of the strengths of the field – namely the relatively easier availability of funding – is also a source of weakness. The tendency for research to be funding-driven may induce constraints arising from (too) close involvement of sponsors in the research process. The major problem here is that the overwhelming pressure for ‘applied’ work and for immediate results tends to prevent attention to conceptual issues and to methods that may require more time to develop and mature. Another distinctive feature of this field is the centrality of dissemination and knowledge transfer which is crucial in policy studies. This might turn into a vulnerability as well, because the ‘impact’ of research depends in the last analysis on whether public institutions acknowledge the findings and take them seriously.

### 2.2.4 Science and Technology Studies

Science and Technology Studies (STS), along with cultural sociology, is recognised as a leading sub-field within British sociology. It has acquired a truly impressive international reputation and has been standard setting for the field world-wide. But unlike Cultural Sociology, STS is not heavily identified with or committed to the discipline of sociology, especially since it is now considered an independent specialisation.\(^\text{12}\) The rise of STS has, perhaps not surprisingly, been driven by interest in the social impact of the latest advances in the sciences and of new technologies (especially information and digital technology, genetics, and biotechnologies) and a wide range of concerns associated with the degradation of the environment and climate change. STS has responded to these major impacts by developing a rich conceptual array of tools for deepening our understanding and methodological innovations that allow an empirical grasp of these new developments and phenomena. Major research topics include public engagement of science; modes of co-production between science, technology and society; and the social and epistemological aspects of new scientific and technological developments such as nanotechnology, synthetic biology, genetic engineering, financial markets, climate change, and environmental risk.

STS is a diffuse and varied field that is self-confident enough to see its diffuseness as a strength. It goes beyond traditional sociology in not privileging the human world but rather relativises it as a component of a larger ensemble of socio-technical systems. In doing so, it has developed a number of fruitful theoretical approaches that lend themselves for empirical studies and that have diffused widely elsewhere. Its ability to address contemporary anxieties – such as those around genetic engineering or climate change – is another one of its main assets. Likewise, it has also succeeded in being listened to and, to some degree influencing, science policymakers and research councils. STS has also had significant impact on a wide range of institutions including, for example,

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\(^{12}\) The principle UK STS groups are located within sociology departments or in a social science school. STS contributions to mainstream sociology journals are less common, however.
museums and their practices. One of the advantages of STS is its ability to translate the complex world of science and technology for the lay public and to serve as an intermediary between the natural sciences, policymakers and society at large. For the time being, STS seems extremely strong, both in its intellectual innovativeness and in its ability to attract major funding for research that (still) is conducted according to one of the main tenets of STS, namely its reflexivity.

2.2.5 Economic Sociology
Despite its quite central position to UK sociology in the past, economic sociology has receded to a less prominent place over the last decade. Many reasons are cited for this, including the shift of academic interests due to the ‘cultural turn’ of the 1980s; the entry into economic themes by other fields, notably science and technology studies, business and management studies, cultural sociology, and geography; and a generational transition, due to retirement of reputed older scholars. Main areas of research in economic sociology now include transnational economic institutions and globalism; critiques of neoliberalism; markets and finance; new forms of service work, especially call centres; consumption practices; emotional labour and bodily work; the knowledge economy; skills; work-life balance; and diversity and discrimination in the workplace. The most influential projects have included the Social Change and Economic Life Initiative (SCELI) as well as those on The Future of Work, and on Gender in Local Labour Markets. *Economy and Society, Work, Employment and Society,* and *Gender Work and Organisation* are prominent journals in this field with global reputations as field leaders.

The major challenge confronting this field is the competition it is facing from other disciplines and sub-disciplines within sociology that address research topics in and around the social aspects of the economy. For example, much of the research on the changing forms of work, or new modes of flexible labour now takes place under the rubric of globalisation rather than the traditional field of industrial sociology. Similarly, the best known recent work on financial markets is identified with science and technology studies, while cultural sociology claims much of the work on consumption.

2.2.6 Cultural Sociology
Cultural Sociology has been among the leading fields in UK sociology in recent times. This is reflected in its prominence in the RAE 2008, and in almost all the leading departments; in the world-wide reach of its journals, notably *Theory, Culture and Society*; and also in the substantial research funding that projects in this field have managed to secure on a consistent basis. The main strength of this field is its demonstrated ability to produce empirical research that has acquired an international reputation for its theoretical sophistication as well as its methodological rigour and innovativeness. Prominent research topics include: cultural class analysis; cultural economy including aspects of digitisation, informational work, network culture and cultures of creativity; cultures of consumption; cosmopolitanism, ethnicity and multiculturalism. The Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change (CRESC) is a prominent initiative, as are the research programmes around *Identities and Social Action* and *Cultures of Consumption*. New journals have also been established, including the *Journal of Cultural Economy*.

Cultural Sociology has emerged out of an ‘exported’ field – Cultural Studies – that had roots within sociology but became a sub-discipline in its own right. However, it is also unusual in that, despite its lineage, it has retained its sociological identity and has in fact contributed significantly to the revitalisation of the parent discipline (this is in contrast to the localisation of Cultural Studies in humanities departments, and its acknowledged methodological weakness). Cultural Sociology in the UK has also acquired international importance from the mediating role it has played in linking European theory to American empiricism and methodological rigour. As a field still on the ascendant, Cultural Sociology does not seem to have any major weaknesses at the moment.

2.2.7 Gender and Women’s Studies
This is a very vibrant field with innovative work in race, class, sexuality, and ethnicity, immigration and migration, space and place, embodiment, media and popular culture, cyberculture, cosmetic cultures and tourism. It has replenished earlier GWS work on key social institutions – family, education, economy, as well as on care and affect, and science and technology. It has resisted the splitting off of gender and sexuality, vitally contributing to
masculinities and queer studies, as well as to theoretical analysis of the relation between gender and sexuality. It is engaged in critical citizenship studies, neo-liberalism and global studies of social positionings, and identity formation theories. Theoretical development, epistemology and methodology mark the interdisciplinarity of this sub-field, which has very good transnational knowledge flows through a number of international journals and collaborative projects. There is an impressive list of these, with evidence of impact in policy development and actions of other types, refreshing 'public sociology'.

Yet, the continuation of these impressive achievements is also at risk. Productive transdisciplinary work with the Humanities may become jeopardized by the trend to split courses into single discipline fields at Masters level. Another risk arises if funding for Doctoral students is increasingly being awarded to single discipline work. Without a part-time entry route, the GWS postgraduate degrees will lose the core, often mature female student. As Universities respond to these funding strictures, GWS Centres may lose the space in which they have developed this distinct profile. Historically, Sociology departments have afforded space for GWS to flourish, and continue to facilitate feminist/WS work in a range of fields at Postgraduate level. However, GWS researchers need to be reassured that this space would still be available to them if 'rationalisation' exercises lead to the closing down of GWS Centres. It is troubling that this theoretical and substantive input has not been mainstreamed in undergraduate and other courses. Nor has it systematically been appropriated to inform the work of social theorists. The weaknesses of the field are exogamous.

2.2.8 Research Methodology

There is no straightforward narrative here. Strong and rigorous methodology, with no exclusion of any particular methodology, is a distinguishing feature of much UK sociology. This is marked by self-reflexivity and a very good degree of fit between the discipline and its method/s. There has, however, been unevenness in the spread of methodologies, with most of that produced over the decade using qualitative methodology (see also 2.5). That being said, qualitative methodology has seen immense development, becoming more rigorous and systematic, with new data collection, recording, analysis and re-presenting techniques. Sociologists have played a central role in these developments compared to other social science disciplines.

Business end-users bemoan the lack of quantitative, longitudinal data researchers. They feel they have developed more sophisticated methods themselves, even in market research. The investment in quantitative methods training, through the funding of the National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM) and their exciting substantive research projects, has done much to address this problem, creating more quantitative research capacity, reinvigorating both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, as well as spearheading new mixed methods, and multi-modal simulation and other methods research. The development of methodological capacity through the choice of research areas has led to a recursive loop in which theory, methodology and substantive areas inform each other.

There is evidence also of innovation outside large Centres and projects. The UK contribution to the European Social Survey is fundamental; important also is its contribution to the European Values Survey and the work on the National Census (Economic and Social Data). Through discourse analysis, visual research and narrative research, sociology gives a distinctive profile to joint projects with the humanities, such as the ESRC/AHRC Religion initiative. There has been an increase in interest in how to archive data sets of all types. Access to these remains limited, with possible waste of the investment. Academics have privileged access, yet make less than full use of these. Whilst many of the projects referred to above display a creative, productive approach, especially in qualitative research, quantitative research remains clearly less exciting to a wider audience. Despite survey link schemes, data set archives and others, there appears to be less take up of these methodologies across UK sociology as whole. Journal article length, which discourages fuller engagement with methodological concerns, may contribute to this. It deprives readers of an appealing way to access the methods market.

13 These include the Care, Values and the Future of Welfare (CAVA) project on parenting beyond narrow concepts of ‘family’, work on cosmetic tourism (covered by BBC), on women’s history (disseminated through newspapers, networks, and libraries), gender violence (improving UN indicators), and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization equality measures.
2.2.9 Social Theory

This is a strong area marked by different styles of theorising: theoretically informed description that is close to empirical work and more abstract, normative theories. Its main strength comes from building upon a tradition of (imported) continental philosophy, as well as from more recent and emergent work. Until recently, only a few UK sociologists were seen to be ‘outstandingly’ contributing to world wide ‘contemporary’ theory, some of them working in the US. There have been timely appropriations and dissemination of both classic and contemporary theory, often customised for teaching. Recent work, which is travelling well, includes models of welfare regimes, actor-network theory (which originated in STS), governmentality, critical realism, mobility studies, structure-agency dialectics, time, and the body.

Emerging areas include the sociology of emotion, complexity theory, risk, nature-society-environment, globalisation (multi-scalar and post-colonial complexities) cultural studies and gender studies. Theoretical currents expanded or revived are Marxist, post-modern, post-structuralist and post-colonialist theory (thanks to the scholarship of Afro-Caribbean, South Asian and other post-Imperial background scholars). Main trends cluster around recognition of the multi-scalar nature of social relations, of complexities of time/space, the reworking of micro-macro relations, as well as a revival of comparative and historical work.

The confidence that the standing of this impressive corpus of work within this subfield stands in striking contrast to the weakened sense of identity of UK sociology in general. Theory has fluid and porous boundaries, is diverse and dispersed. This makes it hard to identify a ‘core’ or ‘cores’, which despite contributions to the philosophy of the social sciences, meta-philosophical reflection, and theories of knowledge production, remains elusive. Social theorists do not see it as their responsibility to identify the theoretical ‘core/s’ of the discipline, even if they recognize the consequences for Sociology if theory is only transmitted to the younger generation through its mediation (watering down) in substantive fields of application.

The theorists with whom we spoke seemed to be somewhat complacent about the position of theory within British sociology. They seemed offended by the current emphasis on methods, yet unwilling to contribute to a theory-led methodology. There has been criticism that some theories, such as feminist and cutting-edge STS work with its de-centering of the ‘humanistic’ tradition of classical sociology, have yet to permeate social theory. The sometimes weak linkage of sub-fields to theory is as much the responsibility of social theorists as it is of the ‘thematic’ researchers.

The main areas of theory have generated dedicated and high standard international journals, with articles a preferred output, but there are few monographs that display the work of mid-career theorists. Funding (not long term enough for theoretical development which often follows a more humanistic path) and audit regimes (with their narrow criteria) may be contributing to the shrinkage of theory submissions to RAE. Lately, visibility has been increased through the resurrection of the BSA theory group and the field may well recuperate some of its past centrality.

2.3 Institutional and structural issues

The academic world in the UK has changed dramatically over the last three decades. The globalisation of higher education and profound transformations in its modes of organisation have generated an increasingly competitive and entrepreneurial research and educational environment. The UK response to this new global climate has been to develop an exceptionally intense “audit culture” to monitor and shape university research, curriculum, and institutional priorities. Managerialism has become the dominant mode of governance of universities.

Since the 1980’s, the UK government and the research councils, such as the ESRC, have intervened actively to shape the future of research and teaching. The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), created in 1986, represents the most formidable and consequential of these interventions. Designed to be both a method of assessment and a policy instrument to enhance the competitiveness of UK research by improving the quality and quantity of

productivity, the RAE provides ratings of the quality of research conducted in specific departments and units of UK higher education institutions. These departmental rankings determine allocation of funds. From the early days of the pilot scheme to the more formalized exercise that is now institutionalized, the RAE has had a massive impact on UK research and academic life.

The RAE, the Teaching Quality Audits (through the Quality Assurance Agency) new funding policies and criteria established by the ESRC, and the introduction of university fees in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland (but not in Scotland), have produced a competitive and partly anxiety-ridden intellectual climate. The new model of the dual funding system\(^1\) generates intense competition to attract resources and students between universities, departments, and other units within universities. While it will be left to future historians to assess the overall effects of more than two decades of RAE on British academic life and on research, we limit ourselves here to point to some of the most salient effects it had on sociology.

RAE criteria have been particularly narrow and in their specific narrowness, harmful for sociological research. On the other hand, ESRC, which post-hoc evaluates research projects has had a much broader range of criteria. We shall return to these issues in section 4.

What we have seen in practice is that the overall emphasis on evidence-based policy that has emerged as the rule in governing research practices in the UK (much more than in other countries) is often converted into the opposite: policy-based evidence. Government users of research in particular are seen as exerting pressure for an instrumental research agenda with immediate or short term results that fit into a preconceived policy agenda. This kind of policy-relevant research is more likely to be generated within thematic, specialized university units, such as Schools of Education, Public Policy, Business or Environmental Studies. Such interdisciplinary, applied programmes enjoy closer links to government and policymakers which enhances their capacity to secure funding. As a result, such units have proliferated and flourished, enabling them to hire sociologists, sometimes to the detriment of traditional departments of sociology.

Sociology in the UK seems to have suffered disproportionate levels of fragmentation from its status as a “high export discipline” whose natives migrate to interdisciplinary thematic area as highlighted in Section 2.1. We have also repeatedly noted that these migrant sociologists may be contributing substantially to collective research capacity, innovation, and conceptual or methodological developments in their new homes. Sociology as a parent discipline, however, appears to suffer greater fragmentation than other social sciences. Links to sociology departments are waning and in some cases have been lost eventually leading to the loss of entire departments of sociology. During the time of our visit in the UK, a review of the Department of Sociology at the University of Birmingham was under way. That review has now recommended that the department be closed.

Whether competition is good or bad depends also on the conditions under which it is exercised. For a discipline like economics, united around a strong paradigm, competition may become a strength. Sociology, particularly in the UK, was constituted as a Third Culture, but not necessarily around a unified paradigm. On the contrary, a diversity of paradigms and its internal pluralism continue to be one of its defining characteristics and part of its intellectual dynamics. Exposure to the competition rules set by the RAE has therefore had a number of dispersive, and arguably, negative consequences for the discipline.

As the RAE has evolved from a quality assurance process to a crucial component in competition for funding, it has led to concentrating resources and students in those departments and units which attain the highest rankings, while weakening (and demoralizing) faculty and students in lower ranked departments. According to the figures produced by Wakeling\(^1\), Sociology departments earned ca. £150 million of research income for 2001-2002/2006-2007,


with six departments out of 39 accounting for more than half of this. Predictably, departments and researchers devise strategies for “gaming the system” such as submitting grant applications on currently fashionable topics and under Sub-Panels with fewer competitors. When a leading UK sociologist with international recognition is evaluated in Social Policy rather than in the Sociology Sub-Panel in order to maximize gains, clearly something is wrong. Early career researchers relayed disheartening tales of the pressure they felt to adopt research and career strategies to maximize their success in funding and ranking by gaming the system. C. Hood and his colleagues have shown the limits of long term focus on performance indicators and ranking systems: figures become less and less relevant. The damage for sociology has been particularly severe, as shown by the remarkable decrease in the number of entries to the Sociology Panel in the last RAE.

It is fair to say that the RAE has also led to some positive consequences in general, although not particularly to sociology. Many universities have emerged from the shadow of Oxbridge and the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). They are now more visible in their own right and with their particular profile. Arguably, some of the new universities have benefitted accordingly. Within departments, the value attached to research has increased and so has overall funding, despite the fact that its distribution and adequacy remains highly controversial. In some departments the RAE has led to the formation of new ‘corporate identities’ around a more heterogeneous and interdisciplinary composition. The Panel connects the specific vulnerabilities of sociology as a discipline with its internal interdisciplinarity and open pluralism to the largely negative impact that sociology has suffered under a regime which is ill-fitted to its characteristics and which fails to do justice to its contributions which are neither short-term nor instrumental.

2.4 The international dimension
UK sociology is one of the leading traditions with an international profile and influence. Based on the evidence we obtained, the claim of UK sociology exerting a major influence around the world can be sustained. It compares well with most other national sociologies. In this section we review factors that appear to strengthen its international position, but which – paradoxically – can also undermine it, if certain warning signals are not heeded.

2.4.1 The comparative advantages of the English language – and its potential drawbacks
The first point may sound trivial but is essential to understand the dynamics of British sociology: English is the language spoken and written by the most important concentration of sociologists in the world, i.e. the US and the Commonwealth. The process of globalisation and the continuing integration of Europe have further increased the significance of English as the lingua franca in the production of knowledge and research. This has important consequences: through keeping close links with colleagues in the US, sociology in the UK has remained distinctive in its intellectual development, but equally open and attuned to further developments. Leading UK sociologists have been able to teach in the US for part of their academic life and mutual exchange has been easy. No language barriers exist. In parallel the development of sociology in Australia, and to a lesser extent in Canada, New Zealand, South Africa and India, were influenced by and remain closely linked. For historical reasons, British sociology has thus been more international than Italian, French, German or even US sociology.

Another advantage conferred to British sociology is related to the attractiveness of its universities, journals and publishers. Many world leading journal publishers (e.g. Sage, CUP, Blackwell, Taylor and Francis) are based in the UK, which has helped to diffuse the intellectual influence of British scholars beyond UK borders. Global publishers like Polity Press, OUP, CUP, Routledge, Sage and others have enabled UK scholars to play a dominant role not only in getting their own work published, but to select the work of sociologists from abroad to be translated. This publishing infrastructure has remained very strong and has been used in an optimal way by British sociologists. The more sociology becomes globalized, the more widespread the use of English as the dominant language and the more central the role in international debates played by journals and books publishing in English.

British sociology has also been very influential, especially in the early days, in the emergence of a European sociological community. Research projects funded under the EU Framework Programmes, the European Science Foundation or the European University Institute in Florence, owe a lot to British scholars. British sociologists have been involved in many of the early and important comparative EU projects on social mobility, employment, trade unions, gender relations or cities. They were also very influential in the making of the European Social Survey (ESS). Especially in the first decades of the EU research community, British scholars were the avant-garde of a European sociology in the making.

International networks, often active throughout the Commonwealth, have also played a role in the keen interest British sociologists have developed for questions of globalisation. British sociology has been at the forefront in the conceptualization of society beyond national societies.

2.4.2 Bibliometric indicators
The internationalisation and the intellectual influence of UK sociology that goes with it, is also supported by the bibliometric studies. We consider them as one indicator among others and are aware of their many limitations. For this review, the ESRC commissioned bibliometric data on British sociology from Thomson Reuters covering the period 1999-2008. The report looks at citation impact figures in order to determine the citation impact of UK sociology articles in comparison with other disciplines and other national sociologies. UK sociology fares less well than UK social anthropology or history, when using a measure of relative impact i.e. the annual average of citation per paper relative to the world average. The report notes that “the world total of sociology papers indexed annually has increased by 42% from 2657 to 3782 over a ten years period. The UK’s share of these papers has increased slightly from around 13% to around 15%, and its citation impact, relative to the world baseline, has also increased slightly”. British sociology has clearly well adapted to the wave of citation impact in journals and has taken advantage of the globalisation process with an increased production of papers and increased number of citations. While in other countries sociologists are still learning the “citation” rules of the game, British sociologists, whether they like it or not, have become very good at this.

Within the limitations of this bibliometric report, these figures corroborate other pieces of evidence we have gathered. British sociology remains very influential internationally and more so than countries of similar size. These indicators and elements of evidence therefore suggest an intellectually healthy discipline with a strong international influence in terms of publications.

2.4.3 The attractiveness of British universities
The quality of British sociology, the open intellectual atmosphere of many departments, and the autonomy and entrepreneurial spirit of universities have allowed British sociology to become a point of attraction for many foreign scholars and students alike. While most other national labour markets for sociologists have remained often tightly closed and rigid for language and other reasons, British universities have welcomed waves of foreign colleagues and students with little equivalent elsewhere, except the US. Many departments in the country have hired foreign sociologists under an exceptionally open recruitment policy. The contributions by an international diaspora (including Puerto Rican, Canadian, Greek etc.) have strengthened a readiness to embrace internationalisation, globalisation and European connections. In the past and still today, leading sociologists from abroad have been welcome in UK universities and a fertile exchange of leading scholars with the US, Canada, and Australia, in particular is taking place.

18 Thomson Reuters, Bibliometric data for the ESRC benchmarking review of Sociology, September 2009. The use of bibliometric measures is very disputed in British sociology and elsewhere. The Panel had required more figures in particular about the influence and the impact of books and book chapters which are an essential feature of the production of knowledge in sociology. It was not possible to obtain this information, nor did we receive figures from the countries we had requested as comparators. We therefore decided to use the existing figures as a minor point among other arguments.
Although figures about Starting Grants and Advanced Grants awarded by the European Research Council (ERC) do not single out those that went to UK sociologists, there is no reason to believe that sociology does not follow the general pattern. It shows the UK consistently in a prime position as having the most attractive host institutions. A high percentage of the ERC award winners with UK host institutions are foreign-born.¹⁹

Leading sociology departments also have a tradition of enrolling large numbers of foreign students from the US or Australia. LSE has trained generations of students from abroad, including large numbers of European sociology students. British universities have become a central reference for foreign students from around the world who are eager to get their undergraduate or a postgraduate degree in sociology in English. More quickly than their European counterparts, British universities have had to compete to attract students and they have thus been more attuned to the globalisation of higher education. This has also benefitted British sociology. In our interviews with early career students, early career researchers and heads of departments, this dimension has been repeatedly emphasised. Young lecturers of foreign origin we met have in particular praised the wealth of experience they gained from this openness, together with a more democratic attitude, the exposure to a variety of intellectual traditions and access to students and colleagues with diverse backgrounds.

2.4.4 The international dimension of UK sociology: a view from inside

This strong international standing was well reflected in our meetings with HoDs. Many of them proved quite pleased with the state of internationalisation of British sociology. They drew attention to the number of foreign colleagues and students, the openness to intellectual influences coming from the US, Australia or Europe. In social theory, for example, the excellence of British scholars is also based on the ability to comment and compare different theorists based in the US, France or Germany. Many HoDs gave examples of colleagues involved in European projects or in leading European and international journals. Travels to the US or Australia are frequent, less so to Europe. Most HoDs think that British sociology is very strong internationally and far less parochial than the US or mainland European countries.

The Panel supports this view. The openness of the labour market and the attraction of foreign undergraduate and graduate students are very strong points of the discipline. In domains of excellence in terms of research, from religion to globalisation, cultural studies, STS, social mobility and gender, among others, British sociology has been able to build on the strengths of these fields and to develop a strong international intellectual influence. The Panel does not doubt that British sociology, the US aside because of its size, is an internationally leading sociology, and certainly far more international and influential than that of Germany, France, Italy, India, Canada, Australia or Japan.

….and a warning from outside

However, the Panel would like to introduce a more nuanced tone and to identify some warning signals for the future. In the discussions we have had, there were also some signs of complacency in the assessment of the internationalisation of British sociology.

When asked about the internationalisation of British sociology, most of our respondents answered the question in relation to the US and Australia. With exceptions, such as STS and a few others, many respondents remained vague or referred to the open recruitment policy instead of providing precise descriptions of ongoing trends, research projects or PhD training programmes in relation to the rest of the world, or even within the EU. Sociology in the non-Anglo Saxon world, it seemed to us, is often assimilated to a few social theorists in Germany and France. We were struck by the limited number of comparative research projects, the widespread lack of information about EU funding possibilities, the absence of concern for comparative PhD training, and the seeming ignorance of sociological developments in South America, India or China.

¹⁹ http://erc.europa.eu/
Admittedly, the respondents we met may not have been representative of those who actively pursue research collaborations in other parts of the world or closely follow developments elsewhere. Nevertheless, we were under the strong impression that our concerns about internationalisation were either not understood, as when they was brushed off with the argument that the world, i.e. students and professors come to us, and therefore we are international, or that there was a real lack of awareness. British sociology is not exceptional in this and similar conclusions would probably be derived in most other countries. In contrast, however, in most other countries an acute awareness would exist about the lack of internationalisation. In the case of UK sociology we had at times the feeling that being part of what is now referred to as the Anglo-sphere, was sufficient. The Panel does not share that view. As the world is becoming more globalised and interdependent and comparative research at a different scale is becoming ever more central for sociology, complacency would be a risky answer. The lack of comparative training is a real drawback in PhD training. It is also well known that the expertise in other languages is not increasing in the UK population and sociologists do not seem to be an exception.

2.4.5 Internationalisation seen in an EU context

From an EU point of view, the leadership once provided by UK sociology may soon become a thing of the past. As more and more sociologists in different countries speak and write in English, the intellectual influence of the UK in EU projects and EU funding, including projects like ESS, is waning. Apart from an enlarged EU and the policy of attempting to be “inclusive”, the funding modalities of EU projects that require a substantial part of the costs to be covered by the host institution, may have contributed to the relative decline of UK sociology participation rates in EU projects. The weak participation of UK young academics in PhD summer schools and in research projects, however, indicate a clear lack of internationalism which partly is masked by the language question. With some notable exceptions, UK sociologists have become relatively discrete on the European scene. While some continue to be involved in comparative projects, the production of major results linked to comparative projects seems to have become less visible.

There is no doubt that without the UK there would not be a European Social Survey. It still owes much today to highly competent UK scholars who continue to do good work, especially in the collection and organization of data. Also in this research field, the generational change will be crucial. Serious concerns have been expressed that competition from a parallel structure built and operating on a predominantly commercial basis, may severely undercut the capacity of UK sociology to continue in this important area.\textsuperscript{20}

Leading UK sociology journals do not seem to attract many articles from the US (an indicator for strong impact factor) nor from the rest of the world. Most comparative researchers know that hosting foreign colleagues cannot make up for spending a significant period in a different country. English may have become more widespread, but the interpretation of aggregated figures and comparative research itself often presuppose a serious understanding of countries like India, China, Brazil or Sweden. In depth involvement in research projects, experience with comparative work and knowledge of another language is not widespread in UK sociology.

In the future, such deficits may become more apparent. If more and more English language sociology journals appear in the world outside the UK, if more sociology degrees are offered in English and in universities ranging from Taiwan to Santiago or Amsterdam, if more sociology involves comparative research of various kinds, UK sociology might appear over time as far less robust in terms of internationalisation. And, if more sociologists write and teach in English all over the world, the significant comparative advantage of UK sociology in terms of internationalisation might be on the wane.

2.5 Research Methods

In our review of the strengths and weaknesses of UK sociology (see 2.2.8) we gave a brief account of the state of play of research methodology. The upshot of our assessment is, that innovative work continues to be done in developing qualitative methods, but that British sociology remains weak in quantitative methods (which might well be an issue of tiers, with one tier of high level research methods reflected in sociological engagement with NCRM and the Researcher Development Initiative, and a lack of diffusion into mainstream sociology departments as the other tier). Moreover, methodology is a sensitive and oft-discussed subject. In this section, we address primarily what we see to be the major deficiency, namely the relative neglect of quantitative methods and what can be done to address it.

The social sciences have a shared interest in the scientific study of people, grouped into aggregates in various ways. In pursuit of this interest, sociology has in common with economics, psychology and political science the extensive use of statistical methods applied to data on individuals and groups, both for descriptive purposes and for the development and testing of hypothesized causal processes. Of course statistical methods are not the only valid mode of inquiry, and each of the social sciences also embraces its own theoretical and qualitative approaches. But, arguably, statistical methods form a common core of social science. They also offer the possibility for an interesting (even critical) engagement with the origins and modes of data collection, the construction of statistical categories and the social analysis of their management and use for policy or other purposes. That UK sociology makes relatively little use of statistical methods, and the study of their epistemic status is problematic both in neglecting a sociological object of inquiry and in its engagement with the other social sciences in the international domain.

The deficit in quantitative methods traces to undergraduate programmes in sociology, which typically require little or nothing of the students in statistics, and indeed do not even offer much in the way of statistical coursework. One explanation is that students who elect sociology are drawn from those who were not mathematically inclined in school, and hence were channelled away from math and science at age 16. Postgraduate students in sociology are exposed to some statistics if they have a "1 + 3" ESRC studentship – the one-year masters includes training in various methods, and there is good quantitative training available in centres. That one year is not enough to provide a more advanced preparation in any direction. Some postgraduates do not even have that exposure, but rather devote their entire postgraduate residency to their own research. A disturbing result of all this is that most British-trained sociologists cannot read the quantitative literature in sociology with any degree of understanding. Furthermore there appears to be an anti-quant culture – a standard undergraduate methods course will include as much time critiquing the use of quantitative methods as teaching them (although critique presupposes an understanding of what is critiqued). It seems to us that the place to start seriously in quantitative methods training should be at the undergraduate level. Quantitative researchers feel isolated in many (but not all) sociology departments, which typically have only one or two faculty members with strong quantitative knowledge, and may feel more welcome in social policy or education.

It may be appropriate to provide some quantification of the lack of quantification. A recent assessment of 146 End of Award reports from ESRC sociology projects found that only 21% were purely quantitative, and an additional 14% mixed qualitative/quantitative, while 62% were qualitative only. To place the issue in international perspective, we compared the distribution of articles published in the 2008 issues of the British Journal of Sociology (BJS) and the American Sociological Review (ASR). Of articles in the ASR, 66% were quantitative, compared with just 47% of the articles in BJS. This contrast becomes more stark when nationality of the (first) author is taken into account – for the BJS, most (9/14) of the quantitative articles were by overseas authors, while for the articles by UK authors only 31% were quantitative.

The ESRC has recognized the deficit and has taken some steps to remedy it. In addition to training programmes, there has been a large investment in data. The result is that there are birth-cohort data sets and large-scale longitudinal data sets on households that make the UK a leader in this area. But the culture of UK sociology tends to reject the view that systematic population data and the statistical methods to analyze such data deserve a central place in education, training, and research.
As discussed in section 2.1, part of the distinctive character of UK sociology is its strength in innovative, qualitative methods. There is some question about whether postgraduate students receive adequate preparation in qualitative and mixed methods. But there are certainly innovative projects and centres, for example those using photography and soundscapes, and sensory data generally as part of ethnography, as well as longitudinal, narrative research projects. It is fair to say that the UK discipline has embraced qualitative methods in a way that it has not embraced quantitative methods.

The use of qualitative methods provides a bridge between the social science and the humanities, and it seems fair to characterize the methodological debates in UK sociology according to where on this bridge the field should be. Any definition is likely to be contested and agreement seems to exist only on the ‘Three Cultures Syndrome’ which is seen as a constitutive characteristic of UK sociology as being somewhere in between the social sciences that seek to move closer to the natural sciences and the humanities with their affinity to literature and the arts. UK sociology seems to have followed this historical trajectory of ‘in-betweenness’ with remarkable fidelity by holding its foremost position in the qualitative/humanistic camp. Both approaches have value and will continue to complement each other. However, at the beginning of the 21st century the international norms of the discipline have moved on. The contributions from UK sociology will remain highly influential in shaping them.

2.6 Diversity

The intellectual vitality of a field of inquiry is often dependent on the diversity of its practitioners. This is especially true of sociology, a field whose focus is the increasingly diverse and international social world. As a field, sociology’s subject matter has examined themes of class, race, gender, ethnicity, religion, age, ability, sexuality and citizenship. In this context, it seems useful to examine the diversity of people within UK sociology and the actual and potential impact this might have on the quality of UK research.

The Wakeling report provides statistical socio-demographic data on staff and students in UK sociology that, unsurprisingly if dispiritingly, offer a familiar demographic pattern certainly not unique to the UK.

Staff are overwhelmingly white nationals (92-94%) and disproportionately male, with the disparity greatest at the senior and higher status levels. Although international diversity has been increasing at lower career levels, even international staff are disproportionately white (EU, North America, Australia). There is very little racial/ethnic diversity to be found among UK sociology staff, nor is there evidence of a trend to increase ethnic/racial diversity among junior staff. White women, however, have steadily gained in their representation at the early career levels.

Students predictably, display a bit more diversity than staff, but ethnic/racial minorities remain vastly underrepresented. Data on women’s representations are slightly contradictory. Although females predominate among undergraduate sociology students, it seems that male undergraduates disproportionately pursue graduate degrees and academic careers in sociology. However, as already noted, international diversity is much greater among students than staff, both statistically and in terms of the range of countries represented.


23 Of 1320 FTE in the 2008 RAE, Wakeling reports that only 20 were Indian, 5 Black or Bangladeshi, 15 “other Asian,” and 35 everything else
The Panel learned from a variety of informants that racial/ethnic diversity is very unevenly distributed across different institutions in terms of both status and geography. Generally, ethnic/racial diversity is much greater in the post-1992 universities rather than Oxbridge, in other words, in the lower status campuses. Among the new universities, local demographics largely determine the degree of racial/ethnic representation. Thus, South Asians have higher representation in northern English universities than in those located in overwhelmingly white locations, like Surrey, Kent, Aberdeen, Belfast, etc.

Information about other dimensions of diversity from various informants and sessions shows also a great deal of variation in the relative degree of under-representation of ethnic and racial minorities among different sub-fields of sociology. For example, the Education group reported (and demonstrated) considerable diversity in the age and class backgrounds of their students, including returning mature working-class students and single mothers. They were proud of their high degree of international students from very diverse nations. Gender scholars also reported considerable age, class, and international diversity among research students, but low representation of ethnic/racial minorities, despite concerted recruitment efforts and the field's extensive engagement with race, migration, and globalization. Ironically, but again not surprising, Gender Studies lacks gender diversity much more so than perhaps any other subfield. It is virtually a sorority.

International diversity seems to be the predominant type of demographic variation in UK sociology. It operates primarily at the research student level, and so it might or might not spur increasing staff diversity as the aging UK sociology staff retires. Moreover, international research student exchange is mainly unidirectional. UK sociology attracts a broad array of international students, but UK students rarely study abroad. Language barriers intersect with funding and rigid time-to-degree constraints to inhibit UK students from studying abroad. Depending on the geographical location, students seemed to be largely trapped in their local environment. Poor information channels might also be at play here, because students were not aware of some EU funding sources available to them for international exchange study.

We encountered one additional aspect of diversity that did not receive much attention either in the reports or in our sessions. We wondered whether talented people from working class backgrounds would be well advised to select academic sociology as a career. We heard a lot about the struggles of early career people in the field, yet were left wondering about mobility routes into sociology as a discipline for domestic students from working class backgrounds. Sociology has been particularly good at attracting and encouraging a diverse student body and indeed has often been expected to help HEIs to meet widening participation targets when other disciplines were failing to do so. The point is surely about whether fees are having an effect on this in which case it is a problem for all disciplines and also whether the diversity of the student body has translated into academic posts. This is an especially important concern given the increasingly multicultural nature of British society. Incorporating talented students from the UK’s multiracial, multiethnic working class would provide yet another dimension to sociology's research capacity.

In conclusion, the familiar bottom-line is that funding structures, geographical location (including status of the university) and policies are the predominant factors working against increasing the participation of underrepresented groups (class, race, ethnicity, age, nation, and even gender). Students stressed factors like the lack of funding for Master’s students as a crucial constraint that disproportionately affects lower-income groups. Increasing fees, of course, operate the same way. Concentrating graduate training at elite centres will potentially exacerbate impediments to access for working class, single mother, and other mature students with family constraints, and all those who depend on local families, communities, and jobs to sustain their educational goals. In addition, the pressure to pursue doctoral research fulltime and to complete a degree within a maximum of four years severely limits access for many underrepresented groups.
3. **Capacity Issues**

3.1 **The continuing intellectual capacity: the next generation**

3.1.1 **Postgraduate training**

According to Wakeling the number of sociology PhDs in UK has remained rather even since 2002, at between 200 and 250 doctorates per year. The overall situation is similar to that in other social sciences such as Politics, Anthropology and Human & Social Geography. Given the overall increase in the number of PhDs, Wakeling sees a relative decline in sociology doctorates.

PhD training itself appears to be rather heavily centred around thesis supervision (rather than coursework). Our interviewees told us about some excellent PhD supervision arrangements, but they also knew about cases with infrequent and unsatisfactory contact between supervisor and student, this notwithstanding Codes of Practice produced by ESRC, BSA and other bodies. Continuing attention should therefore be paid to supervisory practices. Doctoral students come from a variety of disciplinary and work-related backgrounds which, for a general social science, is an asset.

Our interviewees indicated an ambivalent response by doctoral students to obligatory methods courses. Not all students acknowledge the importance of wide methodological skills. Many consider such courses as a tick in the box, while some welcome the widening of their methodological skills beyond the scope of their own thesis work. This often goes with criticism of the teaching of methods for being less than engaging.

Students had a strong sense of obligation to complete their PhDs in 3 or 4 years. They perceive the temporal frame of PhD studies as inflexible, feeling at least in some cases that delay in their graduation would result in disadvantageous consequences for themselves and for their institution, in terms of decreased chances for further ESRC funded studentships. This rigid temporal structuring may, in our opinion, result in unnecessary avoidance of risk and novelty in the students’ work. We want to point out, however, that the pressure to complete in 3 or 4 years comes from outside the discipline, which has vigorously campaigned against any policy which could lead to a ‘dumbing down’ of the PhD. We want to strongly underline that this work, even at PhD level, is important enough to fund for longer periods than the present 3 or 4 years.

As pointed out in section 2.4 British sociology PhD students seem largely unaware of opportunities to study abroad during their academic studies. As a consequence, one important avenue of internationalization remains underused. The lack of interest in studying abroad may be related to the strict time frame, but also to the general lack of linguistic competence other than English.

According to Wakeling (2009), more than half of the sociology PhDs in the latest available statistics for PhD completion in 2005-6 obtained their first employment in higher education (teaching or research). Most of the rest entered into public sector professional work; none were reported as unemployed. Although we lack comparative figures from other disciplines or countries, we are not certain that academia can indeed absorb this proportion also in the future.

Our interviews indicated that many doctoral students are motivated to work outside academia after having received their PhD, but it also surfaced that their doctoral training does not specifically prepare students for that. Also here, the recent efforts by ESRC and other bodies to enhance wider methods training in doctoral studies are welcome, because the transferability of the methods skills.

The general perception of doctoral students of their career prospects was somewhat pessimistic. They expect tough competition for job opportunities in universities, to be worsened by the current economic crisis. On the other hand, the ‘exportability’ of sociology training is perceived as a career advantage, enabling sociology PhDs to find employment in specialized and applied sub-fields of social science.

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24 **2009:30-31**
The Panel was impressed by the liveliness of the intellectual communities among PhD students. Joint activities include student conferences and even student edited e-journals. Students’ participation in BSA conferences and related events should be widened by making attendance more attractive through the provision of specific funding. The ESRC studentships seem to have served well as a major source for funding PhD studies.

The creation of the ESRC Doctoral Training Centres and Doctoral Training Units currently underway will lead to a re-organization of doctoral training also in sociology. Yet, the Panel met with many concerns that were expressed about this process: will it lead towards unwarranted elitism and centralization? Such a worry takes on a specific meaning in sociology, given that excellence of research is not concentrated in just a few institutions, but is distributed through numerous ‘pockets of excellence’. This wide institutional distribution of excellence in sociology must be taken into account in the future arrangements for doctoral training. The Panel regrets that it was unable to enter deeply into the institutional/structural and funding issues connected to the DTC and DTU. We gained the impression, however, that they way they are set up and will be managed is crucial for the future of the discipline.

UK sociology has had a leading role in the development of research training. For example, a majority of School-wide Masters of Research programmes are led by sociology. This makes it even more important, also for the broader intellectual community, that sociology, with its strong tradition, will be fully represented in the new DTCs and DTUs. Concerns were expressed regarding the leverage sociology departments have to encourage their universities to form consortia with ‘acceptable’ units; who and which factors determine whether they have already or will be able to obtain a ‘critical mass’ of doctoral students and, last but not least, what will happen to those departments that lose out in obtaining funded doctoral studentships. This will negatively impact on their research capacity as well as on their ability to spot talent for new staff.

Other concerns regard capacity issues, if doctoral training is concentrated in a few regional consortia: will it reduce capacity of training across the board, leading to an ‘isomorphic culture’ or a ‘geopolitics of sameness’? How much variety will remain and what will happen to the ‘pockets of excellence’ that have repeatedly been identified? Finally, while postgraduate training will be concentrated in a few centres, what about addressing some of the issues that we have flagged, especially regarding research methodology, at the undergraduate level? The Panel believes that the quality of research cannot be addressed without adequate attention to undergraduate education and training.

3.1.2 Early career researchers

Compared to the US, with its different, but much more uniform tenure-track system, early career researchers in the UK have to endure on average longer periods of time in fixed term contracts. But in some other European countries (such as Finland), the gap between getting a PhD and obtaining a permanent position may be even longer.

In the UK as elsewhere the position of short-term research workers appears vulnerable, due to a variety of factors, such as the researchers’ dependency on senior scholars in publishing, and the necessity to work in fields tangential to their own main interests. In such circumstances, research autonomy and creativity may be hard to sustain. The Panel acknowledges that UK universities see a high number of applicants from the rest of the world (especially from Europe) for junior research and teaching posts, which indicates the attractiveness of the UK institutions for early career academics.

For British university institutions, in sociology as well as in other disciplines, independent research grants, especially ESRC grants, are critical for securing permanent positions. Thus, for young researchers, the first permanent position does not serve as a basis for establishing an independent research profile, but the scholar has to earn his or her independence before actually qualifying for such a position.

The interviews also showed that early career researchers, including those who have got their first lectureships, feel particularly powerless in relation to the auditing and assessment procedures typical for British universities. Standards of ranking are sometimes felt as indefinite and ambiguous. Coping may require “jumping through hoops” without “knowing the metric.” Early career researchers feel escalating pressures to publish in prestigious journals.
without being optimally prepared: instruction on writing for journals is often lacking, and the thesis itself is often not designed to generate a number of publishable articles/chapters.

In terms of research interests and theoretical preferences, no major ‘generational gap’ became apparent. Early career researchers and senior colleagues recognize a variety of new fields as emerging and exiting, such as “intersectional” approaches to migration and political sociology, increased interest in transnational dialogues, materiality and embodiment as well as the intersection between the life sciences and sociology.

3.1.3 Is there a retirement crisis?
A repeated concern about the age structure of the profession was expressed in the background material as well as in the interviews. In the coming years, a large number of senior scholars in departments of sociology will reach the age of (possible) retirement, perhaps leading to a loss of ‘institutional memory’ and of ‘scholarly tricks of the trade’. Statistics\(^{25}\), show that the relative proportion of staff in the older age groups is somewhat larger for sociology than for other social sciences (with the exception of education). Similarly, the proportion of staff under 35 is somewhat smaller. The figures reflect the expansion of the field in the 1960s, but also indicate that the situation in sociology is not dramatically different from that in the other social sciences: the age profile of anthropology and that in communication, culture and media studies is similar.

If shortage of funding, restructuring of departments, or other factors do not interfere, the retirement of senior staff will create new career opportunities for the younger generations of sociologists. While we acknowledge the concern about the loss of intellectual capital associated with the retirement of senior academics, we also want to emphasize that the arrival of new generation of sociologists in the key positions entails an opportunity for intellectual renewal. Maintenance of the posts over the retirement of the current incumbents is critical here.

3.2 Funding issues
If we define “inner sociology” as that portion of the discipline that is contained within sociology departments, the general picture in recent years is “of a medium-sized discipline undergoing a period of quantitative stasis” (Wakeling 2009, p. 34). There has been a slight retrenchment in student numbers representing a declining portion of the overall student body. Research funding, on the other hand, has been increasing at a double-digit proportional rate. The adequacy and distribution of research funding among universities, as well as its topic coverage, remain controversial issues. Our discussion here is based on the detailed report to the committee by Paul Wakeling (2009).

Public funding for research in the UK is channelled through a dual system. The national funding councils provide universities with core funding to support research infrastructure and innovative research, while the research councils provide funding for individual projects. The core funding is awarded according to the results of the Research Assessment Exercises, the most recent of which was 2008. The total of £17 million distributed to sociology during 2009/10 was a few million less than the amount allocated to social work, politics, or economics. Of the 39 sociology departments that submitted materials for this process, 9 received more than £1 million (one of which – Essex – was above £2 million). Other sources of research funding were somewhat more lucrative overall.

Funding for specific research projects and capacities come from several sources, including the ESRC, government agencies, charitable trusts and industry. According to the 2008 RAE data, the 39 Sociology Departments that submitted materials had non-QR (quality-related) research income averaging £30 million per year. The actual amount grew by 2/3 from 2001/2 to 2006/7. As with the QR “core” funding, the distribution of other-source income is highly concentrated in a few universities: three departments (Loughborough, Essex, and Cardiff) earned over one-third of the sociology total. It should be noted that some departments that did not submit to the RAE nevertheless obtained research grants, but are not included in these numbers.

The leading sources of non-QR funding during this five-year period were the ESRC (42.6%), other UK government agencies (25.6%), charities (13.3%) and EU funding (8.6%). For the ESRC, funding for sociology is divided between responsive-mode grants (£20 million in current grants) and specific initiatives (£35 million in current grants, the largest of which is genomics, and including ageing, sustainable energy, and others).26 The ESRC also provides relatively generous funding for postgraduate “studentships”; there were 75 new awards to sociology in 2007-8, which places it second to economics within the social sciences.

It is difficult for us to judge the adequacy of research funding in an absolute sense, or its distribution among universities or specific programmes. Relative to the other social sciences it appears that sociology is getting a reasonable share of ESRC funding relative to scale and adjudged quality. By one metric, however, sociology funding is lagging, that being relative to the number of grant applications. Sociology grant applications have been increasing in recent years while the number of grants has actually declined. The success rate (around 16% in 2006-7), was lower than other social sciences, except psychology.

In looking to the near future with its threat of shrinking funding for universities and research, it will become ever more important to seek increased research funding from outside the ESRC and QR processes. UK sociologists can compete for European Union research funds, and may benefit from investing in a greater understanding of how to succeed in that domain. Funding from charities, UK government agencies, and business will continue to be available for applied social research on relevant problems. The availability of such funding is typically not limited to sociology, but rather is open to those with other social science training who can make a contribution. Since often the desired contribution requires a strong grounding in experimental design and data analysis, the UK sociology discipline would benefit from strengthening its capacity in those areas.

3.3 Other resource issues
The UK has made an extraordinary investment in data resources of value to sociological research, and is now a world leader in large longitudinal data sets on individuals and households. This success is due to a concerted effort by the ESRC, which recently devised the National Data Strategy to ensure high quality resources for researching complex societal questions. There is a tradition of birth cohort studies to provide a basis for studying sociological phenomena. Also of note, the British Household Panel Survey, with annual data collection since 1991, is now incorporated into the massive UK Household Longitudinal Study, the largest household panel survey in the world.

An example of a particularly innovative data-generation effort is Timescapes Qualitative Longitudinal Study27, designed to explore the dynamics of personal relationships and identities, and how these are forged, sustained, discarded or re-worked through the life course and across the generations. The study has an important methodological focus, involving the development and scaling up of qualitative longitudinal research (thus bridging the traditional divide between qualitative and quantitative), and the establishment of a specialist archive of research data offering innovative methods of data management and exploitation, based on the principles of data sharing.

The ESRC has made other considerable investments in archiving and access. The UK Data Archive (UKDA) is curator to several thousand datasets including both quantitative and qualitative studies. The UKDA provides remote access to researchers, including secure access to sensitive data that were formerly not available for research purposes. Included here are Government Census data, the Labour Force Survey, the General Household Survey, the British Crime Survey, and the Health Survey for England.

26 Wakeling, P. (2009) provides a table with amounts budgeted by ESRC for current specific programmes and initiatives “in sociology.” But it is our impression that these programmes are not restricted to PhD sociologists, or to members of sociology departments, so it is not clear how much support sociology is actually receiving from these sources.

27 An ESRC-funded multi-year effort at the University of Leeds (Bren Neale, principal investigator)
Research methods are in the global domain, to which the UK is making a focused contribution through the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods. The hub of this Centre is at Southampton University, with “nodes” located at other universities: the shared goal is to stimulate new developments in both quantitative and qualitative research methods, as well as provide assessments and consultations on the research and training needs of the social science community. We were impressed by the innovative research that is emerging from this effort.

We applaud these efforts on the part of the ESRC to advance social research by developing data resources, methods, and training. Given our charge, we must note that these resources are not the exclusive domain of sociology, but are available generally to the social sciences in the UK. To the extent that other social sciences are better equipped to take advantage due to specific methodological skills and interest in quantitative research, the advantage to the sociology discipline will be attenuated, and the sociological perspective lacking in the resulting research products.
4. Impact Issues

Repeatedly, we encountered two different definitions, interpretations and meanings associated with “impact”. The first follows intuitively the common sense notion of the word and refers to the expectations of goods and potential benefits that will flow from the social sciences. The second is specific to the UK and encompasses the standards and criteria used to assess quality and allocate funding to the social sciences. While it is obvious that the two notions are and should somehow be related, the nature and content of this relationship remains complex and contentious. In this section we attempt to unravel the mismatch between the two.

It is not our task to reconstruct the rise of the new “audit culture” in Britain, nor to delve into intricacies of the RAE exercises and the difficulties and challenges it has posed for Sociology. Nor do we intend to analyze the attendant expectations, anxieties and consequences it produced. Nevertheless, no one can dispute the fact that the institutional landscape of UK higher education and research has changed decisively over the past quarter century, whatever the differences of opinion on the New Public Management and the nature of its consequences may be. It is also undisputed that the change brought about a revision in the meaning of ‘impact’ as the potential contribution of sociology compared to ‘Impact’ as a set of regulatory standards and practices for the allocation of funding.

Notwithstanding many disputes and differences around this dialectical relationship, we also met a zone of broad agreement. It is based on two propositions: that public funds expended on the social sciences must be explicitly accounted for in a public and transparent manner, also when accountability is managed by academics themselves; and that investment in higher education and research is not amenable to normal calculations of profit and loss, since it is, at least in part, an end in itself. The Panel discovered that funders and users (at least the ones we met) are actually fairly sensitive to the realities and practices of social science research. Contrary to how governmental, third sector and business users are commonly pictured by academics, they do not always expect instant, exclusively quantitative, or narrowly policy-relevant results. For their part, academics are— or have learnt to be – rather closely aware of the expectations of public accountability.

But if there appears to be comparatively little controversy over the broad objectives of social science, why does the measurement of progress towards these objectives become so controversial? And in what specific ways is the insistence on Impact as a set of regulatory standards perceived as an obstacle for UK sociology from realizing its societal potential?

4.1 Impact as the expectation of societal benefits

The generalized anxiety about ‘soft budgets’ in the higher education and research sector has provoked repeated attempts to both question and justify such spending. It is significant that the new reckonings of inputs and outputs began and were initially restricted to the natural sciences and engineering where the primary benefits sought were of a directly economic and technological kind, with enhancement of the quality of life as a secondary objective. Later extensions of this audit anxiety to the social sciences and humanities seem to have inherited these priorities.

The list of legitimate and publicly expressed expectations concerning the societal impact of UK sociology can be summarized as follows:

1) Direct economic benefits to individuals or groups
2) Critical perspectives on social values and institutions
3) Contribution to enabling informed debate on social issues
4) Contributions towards shaping public policy
5) Contributions towards social cohesion through inter-racial, inter-ethnic, inter-class and inter-age group understanding
6) Contributions to the global pool of social science knowledge and expertise, both theoretically and methodologically

From our observations, interviews and the abundant background material, we found ample, although as was to be expected, diffuse evidence of UK sociology performing well on all of these criteria and dimensions.

They range from the contributions to the acquisition of research skills on occupational mobility and earnings (i.e. direct economic benefits to individuals and groups) to providing critical perspectives on social values and institutions which have always been central to sociology. There have been significant, highly visible and public acknowledged contributions to enabling informed debate on social issues and, in the case of STS, to controversial issues in the science-society relationship, environmental issues or climate change. Equally, contributions towards shaping public policy, like work on aging, poverty or the design of pension schemes as well as a whole range of other policy issues continue to inform public debate and policymakers alike. Sociological research towards better understanding of the preconditions of social cohesion through inter-racial, inter-ethnic, inter-class and inter-age group processes constitutes another widely acknowledged contribution with potentially large social benefits. Finally, contributions to the global pool of social science knowledge and expertise forms part of the professional and disciplinary self-understanding of UK sociology.

Apart from addressing this well-founded and reasonable set of expectations, mention of the actual impact must include UK sociology’s academic quality, the influence it exerts outside the country and its ability to set intellectual quality standards. Impact in this broader, academic sense is also about “leadership”, i.e. the ability to take up new topics and/or approaches, be they theoretical or methodological or any other innovative combination which shape or at least influence the research agenda elsewhere. More detailed answers and evidence for our assessment have been provided in section 2.2.

4.1.1 The Users’ perspective

It may be of particular interest to summarize here some of the testimony we received from Research Users (Business and Third Sector) whom we met:

- Users agreed that the academic work was useful and rigorous. The main complaint was that they could not access enough of it.
- While Users may make some use of the sociological literature, they are often looking for qualified sociologists to review the vast literature on (for the User) newly identified areas of interest and ‘translate’ it into a format which the User required.
- The RAE submission exercise was seen to act as a disincentive for scholars to engage in User-funded research. Users noted that the end-product of their research projects, most commonly disseminated as Reports or Briefs, were commonly not eligible for submission to RAE.
- The measurement of Impact does not acknowledge that there are often long delays before impact can be perceived. For example, BT worked with sociologists to develop a messaging/social communication product. The product development cycle was five years. If Impact had been measured in just three years, the real effect would have been missed. In this respect there is a strong parallel with technological innovation. Inventions often have unexpected applications that are discovered years later.
- The temporal limits endemic in the current measurement of Impact excluded much of the longitudinal research which some Users were interested in, and for which there seemed to be a dearth of qualified sociologists. Both the ESRC and the RAE were seen to be working within a shorter time frame than the Users and their funded projects, but a longer one when it came to disseminating the results of direct research.
- Impact should include the diffuse effects that research can have on what people are talking and thinking about and the vocabulary they use.
Users did not measure Impact by direct policy relevance; they recognized that they would often need to ‘mediate’ sociological research themselves. The much sought-after theoretical and substantive sociology corpus could be given its policy relevance by Users’ own application of it in their work. Most of all, they sought access to this research.

4.2 Impact as metrics of allocating, redistributing and regulating social science funding

In section 3 we have summarized our observations on how changes in British universities, together with the rise of the New Public Management and a widespread audit culture has produced – in terms of its own impact – a highly effective instrument, the RAE. We have described and commented on some of the far reaching changes, including what we consider to be harmful effects, which the RAE from 1986 until 2008, has brought about to the institutional organization of UK sociology and its relative standing in the higher education and research sector. Here we limit ourselves to summarize some of the main changes it brought about for sociology as a discipline.

The most important change is the steady increase in the importance of research as the major determinant of funding support. ‘Block grants’ have become increasingly tied to research and the fixed maintenance component has dwindled. Research has received a further boost with the advent of ‘full economic cost’ funding, since it now brings funds for covering infrastructure and other overheads. Arguably, this increase in the importance of research has also benefitted sociology as a whole (see section 3.2.)

This has brought about a remarkable increase in the power of institutional managers. The RAE system helped strengthen this category, which was much less prominent before the 1970s. It is now academic managers who decide which faculty members will submit, to which Panel or sub-Panel and how to disburse the institutional funds obtained. Their strategising leads to the de facto gerrymandering of disciplinary boundaries and indirectly influences the waxing and waning of sub-fields.

Over the years larger proportions of output have received higher RAE ratings. We were also told repeatedly told that in UK sociology high quality work is spread across the entire institutional spectrum. The discovery of excellence in unexpected and dispersed pockets seems to be one of the unanticipated consequences of the RAE which is also reflected in shifts in the most-published departments in British sociological journals.29

On the other hand, inequalities across institutions are changing shape. Some kinds of inequality are intensified, while others become to some extent mitigated. While the integration of the universities in 1992 (basically the recognition of polytechnics as universities) has greatly raised the stakes in the competition for RAE based funding, the newer universities do not seem to have done too badly, especially in the latest RAE.

4.3 The mismatch between ‘impact’ and ‘Impact’

Our attempt to get a better understanding of the mismatch existing between the two kinds of impact, were hampered by this category, which was much less prominent before the 1970s. It is now academic managers who decide which faculty members will submit, to which Panel or sub-Panel and how to disburse the institutional funds obtained. Their strategising leads to the de facto gerrymandering of disciplinary boundaries and indirectly influences the waxing and waning of sub-fields.

Although societal impact in the broad sense was not part of the RAE exercise (the term is part of the new Research Excellence Framework, we found that Impact measurements in the narrow sense greatly increases systemic stress. Early career researchers are particularly badly affected because they are under greater pressure to perform and their working conditions involve much greater uncertainty. At the extreme, such pressures may stifle individual creativity towards making contributions that will “make a difference.”

29 Crothers & Platt, p. 11
There is the risk of promoting excessive and counterproductive competition among institutions and individuals, discouraging collaborative work and inhibiting mentoring and other forms of (relatively altruistic) peer-learning and dissemination. But examples of the formation of new interdisciplinary groups across established institutional boundaries can also be found.

Whenever too much concentrations of power at the managerial levels occurs, this may induce unfair leverage changing funding priorities to the disadvantage of individuals and institutions. It may thus produce the paradoxical effect of de-linking rewards from performance, if grades – and consequently funds – are awarded to institutions as a whole. Funds may then be redistributed within the institution in a way that is unrelated to, or related disproportionately, to performance.

We were repeatedly told (not only by Users) that the time frame for evaluation is too short and unsuitable for research with longer impact-gestation periods. The period for impact evaluation should be increased for both institutions and individuals. This will also lengthen, and therefore help to stabilise, the institutional funding/planning cycle and to dampen counterproductive levels of volatility.

Even after broadening the areas and sites where Impact is to be evaluated, the problem of unequal weight due to a largely implicit bias remains. Impact on the macro level is bound to receive greater weight compared to local and more diffuse social impact that tends to be under-reported and under-evaluated. Also economic forms of impact will receive greater weight and attention compared to more vague social goods or other more intangible impacts. While this may be inevitable in general, it may affect sociology more than other disciplines.
5. The Future of UK Sociology

In the Panel’s view, the future of UK sociology will crucially depend on its response to the three major challenges it currently faces: (1) balancing the restructuring (rather than conservation) of the ‘core’ of the discipline with a multiple, active and open engagement with its thematic sub-fields to which it has largely successfully exported its specific knowledge and expertise (2) maintaining the balance in the continuing tension resulting from sociology’s position as a Third Culture between becoming a social science defined by a set of statistical methods serving for a predominantly quantitative description and exploration of society as opposed to its ‘humanistic’ orientation and tradition that privileges other, qualitative and conceptual modes of inquiry (3) strengthening its international dimension and position in response to the pressures and opportunities of the ongoing process of globalization. Linked to these challenges and also shaping the future of sociology is the necessity to redefine the societal contributions that sociological research continues to make, both at the individual and collective, institutional level. Arguably, this situation is also related to the relative loss of public visibility of sociology and its public standing.

5.1 The future of sociology as a discipline

Throughout the benchmarking exercise great concerns and a sense of urgency were expressed regarding the first challenge: the future of sociology as a discipline and its disciplinary identity. The ongoing blurring of disciplinary boundaries, even their possible erosion as a result of the continuing “export” of its ‘core’ expertise and the emergence of new thematic fields capable of attracting students and funding, were identified as major trend that will determine the future of UK sociology. Any assessment of their combined effect needs to take into account the seriousness of those who perceive these processes as a threat, but equally the views and (legitimate) aspirations of the thematic sub-fields. Some are on the verge to becoming a discipline or have attained discipline-like status. In other cases, sociology appears as successful ‘colonizer’, while a third kind of relationship is shaped by the challenges of its basic theoretical assumptions and methodological apparatus that sociology encounters in new interdisciplinary contexts.

Any interpretation and assessment of the future of sociology must take into account the larger context that is provided by the ongoing transformation of British universities through mergers of departments and audit pressures, changes in national and international funding sources, in the composition of the student body and enrolment figures, but also in the rise of some major repertoires of empirical sociology moving outside academia in what might become a parallel ‘commercial’ sociology. Together, these transformations call for a differentiated response.

How serious is the threat to sociology as a discipline? The evidence we received ranges from seeing the repeatedly evoked ‘core(s)’ of the discipline at risk, even to the point that it might vanish, to more laissez-faire attitudes that see some benefits in mergers, especially at undergraduate level for widening job market opportunities of graduates. However, a widely-held view is that the continuation of exporting sociological knowledge without strong feedback links to the parent discipline and its concomitant rejuvenation, inevitably brings with it a dilution of sociological content and quality. Definitely, a move towards a ‘sociology lite’ is to be avoided.

The future of sociology as a discipline is thus shaped by overlapping dimensions: the institutional, the intellectual and the funding dimension. Together, they expose sociology to contradictory forces that pull in different directions. Some of them are applied and/or market and funding-driven, others occur in response to new opportunities and still others are provoked by new social formations and realities. This in itself is not surprising, least so to sociologists. Many UK sociologists, however, worry whether or not sociology will be able to generate and maintain sufficient attractiveness as a discipline with its unique ‘core(s)’ and whether it will be able to transmit a distinctive mode of new knowledge production together with a future-oriented, innovative research agenda of emerging themes to the next generation. Some of our interviewees, however, express scepticism whether such a ‘core’ actually exists and how it can be defined.


One of our questions was on emerging fields in thematic areas. While we received some interesting and illuminating answers, the overall picture is too sketchy and lacking in sufficient evidence and representativeness to be included here.
Institutionally, sociology continues to export its expertise and has become a major feeder discipline for courses at undergraduate and graduate level to other sub-disciplines and areas. Examples of successful transition to becoming a discipline of its own are criminology, perhaps followed by education which shows some marked tendencies towards separation from the parent discipline. Another major field of research and professional training in the UK with a long and strong tradition in sociology and political economy now going in the same direction is social policy.

The driving forces for these developments are market demand, funding considerations, and governmental policy interventions. Market demand for undergraduate students lead either to new combinations of sociology with problem-orientated issues or to fashionable new combinations, like media and communication studies. Entering the undergraduate degree market as well as supplying faculty (in the form of PhDs) to the ‘importing’ thematic area, sometimes benefits the latter at the cost of sociology. This is what has largely happened in social policy. Once the process has been set into motion it is hard to reverse.

Whether to characterize the changes such as one of the exodus from sociology departments through the migration into Schools of Education that has led to major institutional and intellectual transformations, as benefit or loss depends on whose benefit or loss is considered. Many educational researchers are content with the thematic nature of their work and feel that sociology is enriched through interdisciplinary work, e.g. by including the dimension of social justice. On the other hand, a two-way traffic feeding back educational concerns into sociology is often constrained by the new institutional environment and not as lively as it could be.

Other examples show that sociology may become the main beneficiary of institutional transformations. Cultural sociology (dealing with virtually all areas of social life under the perspective of meaning, but also of materiality) and sociology of culture (with its main focus on institutions) is a relatively new field with close ties to cultural studies and their long tradition in the UK. It has become, once more, one of the strong fields where UK sociology is seen as leading internationally. In institutional terms, much of the research is conducted in media and cultural studies departments and in gender studies programmes many of which have resorted to the adoption of sociological theories and methods. A two-way exchange between sociology and media, cultural studies and communication has opened up, although not all institutions are involved, nor do all benefit.

In other interdisciplinary arenas sociology faces institutional challenges of a new kind which are closely interlinked with novel intellectual challenges. Science and Technology Studies is one of the major UK success stories, having emerged to wide international acclaim. There is no set view whether STS is (still) part of sociology, since it is a great, adaptable conglomerate, with people moving in to obtain funding for exciting projects. It is diffuse, has no paradigm, and follows the problems. There is a strong attraction of research market forces, like health, biomedicine and the environment. Having no undergraduate teaching integrates STS perhaps more with sociology, but it maintains links to other departments as well. Given its intellectual achievements and its capability of receiving major support from several research councils, sociology should be proud of STS. Nevertheless, STS holds a lesson of pluralism for sociology and challenges some of its most cherished assumptions. The challenge is to be welcome since it points towards the future, where the centrality of ‘the human’ and the exclusively humanistic character of sociology will be further challenged.

Another, inter- and multidisciplinary research setting provides the institutional context for sociology of health and illness/medical sociology. Its institutional location at medical schools and departments of health and nursing provides at the same time a shield against budgetary cuts, while exposing individual sociologists to the risk that they may be the first to suffer. Working in such an interdisciplinary environment creates great opportunities for sociologists, although they must take care not to become merely ‘add-on’ experts for the missing social component. Their disciplinary identities remain precarious, a trend reinforced by not having sufficient skills in quantitative methods (which disqualifies them for becoming PIs) and by publication and conference behaviour, which typically directs them to a medical, and not a sociological environment. Medical sociologists pride themselves as having significantly contributed to sociological theory and see themselves as taken seriously by the users of their research, but their sense of belonging to sociology has become rather loose.
Gender and Women’s Studies is definitely an interdisciplinary area, both in institutional terms and in its intellectual content. Institutionally beleaguered and threatened by the managerial audit culture and funding policies, Gender and Women’s Studies nevertheless continue to be intellectually vibrant. It also continues to be popular at undergraduate and graduate level. Although by now represented, at least in a token manner, in all sub-fields of sociology courses and incorporated into research, the relationship with sociology, and in particular sociological theory, remains troubling. Many theory courses and scholars dismiss feminist critiques and theoretical contributions. Gender and Women’s Studies have greatly influenced or given rise to work on currently fashionable topics like the body, identities, representations and sexuality which have spread also to fields like cultural studies. The relationship between sociology and Gender and Women’s Studies needs to be strengthened. This requires careful consideration of the indeterminacy in the internal allocation of funds within universities.

Sociology is indeed an ‘exporter’ discipline, driven by market demands for researchers, students and by funding opportunities. This is combined with losses of its institutional and disciplinary identity, while the ‘importer’ fields can claim some gains by increased focus on problem-oriented topics and/or widening the job market opportunities for its graduates. There is reason for concern that sociology will continue to lose if the links between the discipline and the sub-fields is not reinforced both institutionally and intellectually.

Intellectually, the issue of who benefits is much more widely open. Sociological theories, concepts and methods (often in their unique UK ‘mix’) will continue to be crucial and are ‘imported’ in areas like gender, critical race theory, cultural studies and, to some extent, STS. When compared to Economics, Political Science or Psychology, Sociology lacks a clearly defined ‘disciplinary core’, although many argue for a specific and unmistakable “sociological approach” (i.e. the relationship between individual agency and structure; ‘the social’; inequalities etc, but also as being reflexive, historical and critical). Paradoxically, this diffuseness makes it more amenable to deployment in applied fields. Nevertheless, there is the risk that important concerns that once strongly influenced the sociological research agenda, such as social inequalities, will become so diffuse that they cease to be visible, let alone have an impact.

Thus, the blurring of disciplinary boundaries (and sometimes their erosion) may create problems of professional identity, particularly for the younger generations. It may also lead to ‘reinventing the wheel’ because new entrants trained in a multi- or trans-disciplinary environment are not as well versed in the accumulated wisdom of established disciplines. It may also induce bias against theoretical work in these areas, although those who do traditional sociological theory seem unaffected by a potential loss of their cognitive authority in other fields.

On the positive side, some very good examples exist where young research fields have shown great potential to enrich sociology. STS has been at the forefront of conceptual innovations that reverberate within sociology. Other examples of cross-fertilization with clear benefits for sociology come from cultural sociology with many innovative ‘discoveries’ of new and exciting research topics and the continuous influx of new topics from Women’s and Gender Studies. Sociological theory remains remarkably self-confident about its own future as the backbone of UK sociology. It does not worry about having an assured space in sociological departments. While drawing on the tradition of great men (and in rare cases, women) may be far from over, the continuing ability of sociological theory to inform good empirical research augurs well for the future. In short, a strong case can be made that sub-fields continue to benefit from sustained links with sociology. However, the extent to which they ‘reciprocate’ or how welcome their contributions are, is uneven.

Funding issues are closely related to the institutional and intellectual dimensions, since the two main determinants are student enrolment and research funds. In many instances, sociology is fighting a losing battle because of poaching on its undergraduate and especially graduate student markets. But it can be argued that rigorous training in sociology remains an important ingredient of successful training and research for other areas as well. Some of the more problem-oriented fields benefit significantly from funding that has benefited sociology as well, while admitting that increasing specialization creates self-contained fields with diminishing spillover of benefits.
5.2 The future of sociology: what kind of discipline?

Both qualitative and quantitative methods are important to building the knowledge base in sociology. While the mix of these two essential empirical approaches is widely acknowledged the ESRC has identified with respect to research, education of undergraduates and training of postgraduate students the relative lack of quantitative methods as a problem, and has made a substantial investment in remediating the problem. Still, it is not clear whether the discipline of sociology (as opposed to the various applied social-science fields) will endorse quantitative methods as essential. The current culture of UK sociology is decidedly resistant. It has opted for a largely qualitative approach and/or for a mixed methods approach.

Seen from a broader context and especially in view of future developments, the neglect of quantitative research and training might be viewed as a “problem” for the following reasons: First, there is an obvious substantive matter: these methods are essential to providing a valid summary description of the characteristics of groups and trends in these group characteristics, or an analysis of the response of group characteristics to changes in the social environment (including intentional policy changes). If the study of such social phenomena and processes is not seen to fall any longer within the remit of sociology, other disciplines, such as economics, will take over. Second, there is a question of whether UK sociologists are able to contribute to and learn from the international literature of sociology, which is predominantly quantitative, especially in the US. Third is the question of whether UK-trained sociologists can fully participate in multi-disciplinary investigations of pressing social problems, which in many areas of concern require a quantitative approach.

In principle, qualitative and quantitative methods complement each other. The more open ended and holistic knowledge gained through extended interviews, close observation, and even participation can provide suggestive findings of great interest. While the deliberate and well-argued choice of qualitative methods is perfectly legitimate if they are appropriate for the research questions that have been posed, other, equally legitimate and interesting questions exist that seek to test findings and develop valid generalizations. This, in turn, requires a more quantitative approach.

In practice, however, there is a conflict. At present, the culture of significant parts of UK sociology tends to be sceptical of quantitative methods or even hostile, while embracing qualitative approaches. There is also a conflict in terms of training: currently postgraduate students in sociology are recruited from undergraduates who have relatively little math education or interest, and are allowed to pursue a doctorate with little or no training in quantitative methods. If sociology programmes required that all students attained some minimum knowledge of statistics, then the “pipeline” of students – as well as the training requirements – would have to be changed rather dramatically.

Looking to the future, we can be sure that quantitative research on problems of longstanding interest to sociologists will continue, and be well supported. Newly emerging research fields, like quantitative social network analysis (although it had predecessors in sociology), are thriving on data that stem from the use of information and communication technologies. They considerably widen the traditional repertoire of data that can be used for empirical social research. Scientific inquiry into social structure, culture and custom, peer influence, identity, and other “sociological” topics are of broad interest in the social sciences and of great interest to government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and business. The question is what role sociology as a discipline in the UK will play in these inquiries. If sociologists are limited by training and interest to qualitative and conceptual approaches, they will not be full participants in this larger research enterprise.

5.3 The future of sociology in the context of globalization

We are adamant in our assessment that UK sociology is (still) well positioned to continue to exert a major intellectual influence world-wide also in the future. A global research agenda for the social sciences is currently not yet in sight, but many opportunities are waiting, especially in responding to the Grand Challenges, for a more intense engagement of sociology at the international scene. In research on issues such as climate change, food security, and environmental issues, the international players come predominantly from economics, followed by
political science. On the basis of considerable work performed on environmental issues in UK sociology departments, we would like to see sociologists getting into this international fray as well, since we are convinced that their voice needs to be heard and taken into account.

On a somewhat more restricted, but still global agenda, UK sociology is well advised to become more aware of the directions and speed of ongoing transformations elsewhere. In section 2.4 we contrasted the present view from inside sociology with some of the warning signals that we detect outside. We hope that they will be heeded in time.

The following section on Conclusions and Recommendations will provide further input on how the future of sociology can be influenced and needs to be shaped.
6. Conclusions and recommendations

The main conclusion we have arrived at is that sociology in the UK is overall in a healthy state, despite the many difficulties both of externally imposed and internally generated origin. It continues to be intellectually innovative and vibrant and shows many reassuring signs of a strong and lively engagement with the contemporary world and its manifold problems. In a comparative international perspective the capacity of UK sociology for new developments and intellectual innovation remains very high. Although a wider, sufficiently detailed comparative reference frame is lacking, the Panel is convinced that the achievements of UK sociology command considerable international respect.

As with any discipline, only even more so, sociology draws its vitality from the great issues of its time. It did so during its early period of institutionalization and more recently, in the late 60s and early 70s of the 20th century. The Panel is convinced that under the currently dramatically altered conditions with its major challenges also for the social sciences, UK sociology will respond in an energetic and innovative way. Given its long and robust tradition of conceptualising problems in order to make them amenable to intervention, it is in an optimal position to connect theory with empirical investigation while aiming to link them to the problems faced by policymakers and citizens.

Our conclusions and recommendations will focus on what we see to be the five main areas where the profession, funders and other stakeholders are challenged to act in such a way that the performance and capacity of sociology is strengthened, thereby opening up multiple, and partly unforeseeable avenues towards future intellectually innovative and socially beneficial productive research agendas.

These areas are to (1) strengthen the institutional organization of sociology as a discipline while preserving its intellectual diversity; (2) bring sociological research methodologies in closer alignment with institutional and international state-of-the-art standards; (3) provide incentives for developing international cooperation, training and comparative research; (4) redefine ‘Impact measurements’ and criteria to maximize the actual societal impacts of sociology; (5) enhance sociology’s academic standing by redefining its image and public authority outside academia.

6.1 Strengthen the institutional organization of sociology as a discipline while preserving its intellectual diversity

The future of sociology as a discipline needs a secure institutional space of its own within the university structure from which it can vigorously engage with its sub-fields located outside the department, multiple other fields and the outside world. If the ultimate goal is the production and development of new knowledge and best analysis to comprehend, explain and contribute to the contemporary world in all its complexity, sociology must be given the means and the institutional clout so that it can train the next generation in a way that offers both a sense of a reconfigured, conceptually and methodologically innovative discipline and a forceful and future-oriented openness addressing some of the major challenges and problems of contemporary societies.

Recommendation 1:

- Support sociology departments within university structures so that they can engage vigorously and in a sustained way with the thematic sub-fields.
- Strengthen undergraduate education in sociology as a way of strengthening sociology’s graduate training and research quality.
- Secure maximum stability and independence in the working conditions of early career researchers.
- Balance the concentration of postgraduate training in a few training centers and units by measures that assure the diversity of sociology, recognizing the spread of pockets of excellence and the innovative dynamics existing also in smaller departments and make sure that sociology departments are not at risk to ‘disappear’ due to (induced) lack of PhD students and research capacity.
6.2 Bring sociological research methodologies in closer alignment with institutional and international state-of-the-art standards

Research methods and in a wider sense, methodologies, remained a highly contested topic, also within the Panel itself. While the Panel was unanimous in acknowledging the pioneering role of UK sociology in developing qualitative methods and various method ‘mixes’, the figures we were given showed that only one fifth of End of Awards reports from ESRC sociology projects were quantitative. As a consequence, the training in quantitative methods, while itself at a high level where it is offered, remains too restricted compared to international standards. We believe it important to adopt pragmatic measures to acknowledge methodological pluralism, while insisting on raising standards where they are now found wanting.

Recommendation 2:

- Strengthen access to and offers for (at least basic) training in statistical empirical analysis and other quantitative methods, as well as access to advanced research training especially for those thematic and ‘core’ sociological areas where interdisciplinary and/or international comparative work requires expertise in quantitative methods.
- Support adequate preparation in qualitative and mixed methods at the highest state-of-art level for all, but especially postgraduate students.
- Support new attempts towards sharing and archiving qualitative research data for multiple use and making restricted data sets available.

6.3 Provide incentives for developing international cooperation, training and comparative research

On almost all accounts, UK sociology ranks high on the international dimension, and certainly higher than other countries. Nevertheless, we came away especially from the meeting with our interview partners, with the feeling of a slight misperception of the situation on their part. The English language and corresponding outlets for publishing are a strong asset that is taken for granted, as is the openness of British universities which makes it attractive for foreign students and staff. Yet, in a rapidly globalizing world and especially in the field of higher education and research, not much can be taken for granted about future developments. While we confirm the strong international standing and position of UK sociology in the world, we also see a number of warning signs on the horizon. To ignore them in a spirit of complacency or parochialism would mean to risk a current comparative advantage.

Recommendation 3:

- Provide incentives for stronger international cooperation, training and comparative research with different parts of the world (not only with the Anglo-sphere).
- Encourage UK participation in international PhD programmes and summer schools, e.g. through providing special fellowships to study abroad as part of the doctoral training.
- Create the preconditions for stronger internationalization through language training opportunities.
- Provide more targeted information about EU funding opportunities and other activities.
- Support research agendas that build on some of the UK sociology strengths in the context of globalization (e.g. global migration, poverty and other social issues); and, in general, encourage comparative research.

6.4 Define “Impact measurements” and criteria to maximize the actual societal impacts of sociology

A large part of our conversations were overshadowed by the difficulties, distortions and constraints imposed by “impact” measurements that in our view clearly do not fit a discipline like sociology. The RAE and its intended and, especially its unintended (and often perverse) effects cropped up in unexpected places and configurations. We realized how difficult it had become to speak about, let alone to conceptualize and operationalize an alternative form of “impact”, that would correspond to the kind of potential benefits and horizon-enlarging views that sociology can bring about.
We are also aware that guidance on REF will be issued in 2010 and that it is unlikely that it will be open to considering recommendations with their particular emphasis on sociology. Nevertheless, we offer the following recommendation as a contribution to shaping policy discussions over the longer term.

**Recommendation 4:**

- Revise evaluation mechanisms by splitting them into two parts with different periodicities and modalities:
  - Part One should consist of a bi-annual evaluation of *individual* research projects based on the usual academic criteria (intellectual merit, methodological rigour, feasibility etc) with audit being restricted to what was promised and actually delivered. Part Two is to consist of 6-8 years *institutional* review that assesses the larger issues of societal contributions of sociological research. This intensive and more detailed exercise could be performed by an international and UK group of sociologists, replacing the current benchmarking exercises.

- Develop new definitions of impact and criteria that overcome the current, inherent drawbacks of quantitative methods of impact assessment. The new definitions and criteria are to be integrated into the two-part evaluation process recommended above.

- Work together with the ESRC and the Funding Councils in order to further refine the REF criteria now foreseen for 2013, in order to facilitate a general move towards ‘light’ forms of auditing.\(^{32}\)

  - Specifically, regarding the three REF elements, Outputs, Impact and Environment\(^{33}\), the Panel believes that sociology will be able to document that it does indeed ‘deliver demonstrable benefits to the economy, society, public policy, culture and quality of life’, but urges that the actual terms of ‘delivering’ avoid the emphasis on short-term, narrowly defined payoffs. It cautions that the Environment dimension referring to ‘research strategy, training of postgraduate researchers and engagement with research users and the public’ does not recognize undergraduate teaching nor those departments that (because of the new DTC arrangements) will lose research students or be otherwise disadvantaged.

6.5 **Enhance sociology’s public standing by reinforcing its visibility and authority outside academia**

Although neither the public image of sociology, nor its authority in wider society were a recurrent point of reference in our mission, it nevertheless surfaced in a diffuse way. Several scholars worried that sociology had lost some of the public and moral authority it had once enjoyed. Unease was expressed about whether the profession was adequately communicating to the outside world what it was doing and why it should be better supported. There were some misgivings about being either too close to policymakers (a comfortable position with regard to funding, but with the potential for losing control of the research agenda) or too distant (offering advice and findings that did not fit into a pre-set policy agenda or worse, as politically inopportune and therefore dismissed).

**Recommendation 5:**

- Strengthen measures and incentives that are already under way (through efforts undertaken by the BSA, the British Academy Policy Forum, the Academy of the Social Sciences and others) to fully utilize adequate public fora, the media and other channels of public engagement to convey the multiple societal contributions of sociological research to policymakers, private sector users, and the public at large.

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\(^{32}\) Stefan Collini (2009) ‘Impact on humanities – Researchers must take a stand now or be judged and rewarded as salesmen’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 13 November, 18-19

\(^{33}\) [http://www.hefce.ac.uk/Research/ref/about](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/Research/ref/about)
Annex 1: Documentary evidence considered

Crothers C (2007): The Changing Profile of Core Publications in the Discipline of Sociology: unpublished paper
Journal submission to the review: Sociology of Health & Illness
Journal submission to the review: Science Studies
Learned Society submission to the review: British Educational Research Association
Learned Society submission to the review: Media Communication and Cultural Studies Association
Overview of the History of UK Sociology: ESRC commissioned report
Overview of Sociology and Social Policy: ESRC commissioned report
Overview of Sociology and Science and Technology Studies: ESRC commissioned report
Overview of Sociology and Research Methods: ESRC commissioned report
Overview of Sociology of Education: ESRC commissioned report
Overview of Economic Sociology: ESRC commissioned report
Overview of Medical and Health Sociology: ESRC commissioned report
Overview of the Sociology of Culture: ESRC commissioned report
Overview of Sociology and Women’s and Gender Studies: ESRC commissioned report
Overview of Sociological Theory: ESRC commissioned report
RAE (2008): Overview of Sociology: RAE
Review of ESRC grants in Sociology 2006-2008: ESRC commissioned report
Sociology Department submission to the review: University of Aberdeen
Sociology Department submission to the review: University of Birmingham
Sociology Department submission to the review: University of Bristol
Sociology Department submission to the review: University of Cambridge
Sociology Department submission to the review: City University
Sociology Department submission to the review: University of Durham
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Sociology Department submission to the review: London Metropolitan University
Sociology Department submission to the review: Manchester Metropolitan University
Sociology Department submission to the review: University of Manchester
Sociology Department submission to the review: Napier University
Sociology Department submission to the review: University of Newcastle
Sociology Department submission to the review: Nottingham Trent
Sociology Department submission to the review: Open University
Sociology Department submission to the review: University of Southampton
Sociology Department submission to the review: University of Sussex
Sociology Department submission to the review: University of the West of England
Sociology Department submission to the review: University of Warwick
Annex 2: Review Steering Group

Joint Chairs

Professor John Holmwood (University of Nottingham, Chair of the Heads & Professors of Sociology (HAPS))
Professor Sue Scott (Glasgow Caledonian University, outgoing President of the British Sociological Association)

Members

Professor Sara Arber (University of Surrey)
Professor Paul Atkinson (Cardiff University)
Professor Ian Diamond (Chief Executive, ESRC)
Professor Miriam Glucksmann (University of Essex)
Professor Lynn Jamieson (University of Edinburgh)
Professor Sir Roger Jowell (City University)
Professor Tariq Modood (University of Bristol)
Professor Diane Reay (University of Cambridge)
Professor John Scott (University of Plymouth)
Professor John Urry (University of Lancaster)
Professor Claire Wallace (University of Aberdeen)
Professor Alan Warde (University of Manchester)
Professor Andrew Webster (University of York)
Ms Diana Wilkinson (Scottish Government)
Dr Neil Wooding (Public Service Management Wales, Equality and Human Rights Commission)
Annex 3: Questions posed at Meetings

ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION AT HEADS OF DEPARTMENT MEETINGS

1. QUALITY ISSUES:
   How good is UK Sociology?
   Areas of strength and weaknesses
   How accurate is the RAE’s characterisation of UK Sociology?
   What is distinctive about UK Sociology?
   What are the strengths and weaknesses of postgraduate training?
   What are your views on the diversity of the discipline?

2. UK SOCIOLOGY IN AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE
   Do you have a strategy for ‘internationalisation’ with respect to specific regions?
   What are your views on the relationship of UK Sociology with the EU, both intellectually and in terms of funding opportunities?

3. THE FUTURE OF UK SOCIOLOGY
   What are your views on the blurring of the boundaries of Sociology? What effects has this had on Sociology in the UK?
   UK Sociology has been characterised as an ‘exporter’ discipline. What in your view are the implications of this for the future of UK Sociology and social sciences in general?
   What do see the future ‘public role’ of UK Sociology?
   What are your comments on issues of ‘relevance’ and ‘excellence’?

4. EMERGING FIELDS
   What newly emerging fields of research and/or controversial issues are intellectually exciting and offer new opportunities for the discipline?
   If there was a Wellcome Trust for Sociology, how would you like the resources to be used?

5. MISSING AND/OR ADDITIONAL ISSUES
   What other issues would you wish the Panel to consider?

ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION AT RESEARCH STUDENTS’ MEETINGS

1. CHOICES AND ALTERNATIVES
   Who chooses to do Sociology and why?
   What are the main competitor/alternative disciplines for research students?
   Why in the UK and not elsewhere?
   What are your views on the scope for international mobility for students?
2. CAREER PROSPECTS
What are the main career options for Sociology postgraduates?
If you were to follow an academic career, would you prefer to stay in the mainstream discipline or to move to an applied or interdisciplinary field?

3. STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF UK SOCIOLOGY
How strong/weak do you think your training has been?
What are your views on the general strengths/weaknesses of UK Sociology?
What are your views on the diversity of the UK Sociology student population?

4. EMERGING FIELDS
What newly emerging fields of research and/or controversial issues are intellectually exciting and offer new opportunities for the discipline?
If there was a Wellcome Trust for Sociology, how would you like the resources to be used?

5. MISSING AND/OR ADDITIONAL ISSUES
What other issues would you wish the Panel to consider?
GENERAL NOTES FOR MEETINGS ON SUBSTANTIVE AREAS

1. What is the relationship of this area of study to Sociology as a discipline?

2. How does research in this area of study affect the identity of Sociology? Does Sociology gain or lose from its relationship to this area of study?

3. In what ways does this area of study benefit from and/or benefit sociological theory and research methods?

4. What have been the major innovations in this area, and where does the UK stand in relation to developments elsewhere?

5. Are there any issues that have been missed?
### Annex 4: Institutional Contributors to the Review

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<th>University of Aberdeen</th>
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Annex 5: Response of the Steering Group to the International Panel’s Report

The Review Steering Group is very grateful to the members of the International Panel for providing such a detailed and comprehensive report on the current state of Sociology in the UK.

The Steering Group is very conscious that the International Panel was set a challenging task. The report was commissioned soon after the publication of the 2008 RAE outcomes and it was important that the benchmarking exercise offered something that was both different from what had been covered under the auspices of the RAE but which was complementary to it. The 2008 RAE had shown that much sociological research in the UK was conducted outside Sociology Units of Assessment and the Steering Group recommended that the benchmarking report should cover a wide range of sociological expertise, paying special attention to areas of research not represented in submissions to the Sociology RAE Sub-Panel.

We are gratified that the International Panel found UK Sociology to be very vibrant intellectually both overall as a discipline and in many of its sub-fields, with very high international standing. We are particularly pleased by the conclusion that, “in a comparative international perspective the capacity of UK sociology for new developments and intellectual innovation remains very high.”

The main work of the International Panel took place just as the impact of the global financial crisis upon national budgets was being made apparent and amidst very serious concerns in the UK about the consequences for the higher education sector. In this context we are especially grateful to the International Panel for their identification of areas of risk for the discipline. We want not simply to commend the International Panel for the clarity with which they have set out these risks, but also to commend the report both to our colleagues in sociology and to those involved in making higher education policy. We are delighted that the report will be launched at the Annual Conference of the British Sociological Association in April where it will be discussed in sessions of the conference devoted to the report as a whole and in terms of several of its specific conclusions.

We, therefore, accept the report in a positive spirit and in particular the International Panel’s conclusion that while the risks confronting sociology are those that face other disciplines in the social sciences and humanities, they deserve a specific and concerted response on the part of sociologists. The Panel made specific recommendations under 5 headings and we respond to these, in turn:

1. **Strengthening the institutional organization of sociology as a discipline while preserving its intellectual diversity:**
   We are conscious that sociology presents less internal coherence than many other disciplines and that this can make it less able to define its distinctive contribution. We are also aware of the need for our professional organisations and venues, such as the annual conference, to maintain a healthy balance among the different sub-fields of the discipline.

2. **Bringing sociological research methodologies in closer alignment with institutional and international state-of-the-art standards:**
   We recognise the considerable innovation in research methods by UK sociologists, especially in qualitative and mixed methods. However, we share the Panel’s concern that this high level of expertise might not be widely distributed across the different areas of the discipline; the BSA and Council of Heads and Professors of Sociology have already engaged in discussions in relation to the ESRC’s Quantitative Methods Initiative and expect this to be a major area for future curriculum development at undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

3. **Providing incentives for developing international cooperation, training and comparative research:**
   We accept this as an urgent issue for us to address, especially since the International Panel identifies a degree of complacency deriving from the role of English as the language of international collaboration. We also recognise that innovative methodologies of comparison remain less developed within the repertoire of UK sociologists than do other research methodologies.
4. **Defining ‘impact measurements’ and criteria to maximize the actual societal impacts of sociology:** The work of the International Panel coincided with the first wave of consultations over the new Research Excellence Framework to replace the RAE. We strongly endorse the Panel’s concerns about how impact is defined within UK debates and the potential consequences of defining this too narrowly in relation to a discipline such as sociology.

5. **Enhancing sociology’s academic and public standing by reinforcing its visibility and authority:** Again, we strongly endorse the recommendation that the profession needs to be actively engaged not just in making contributions to public debates, but in addressing the nature of publics and the role of sociological expertise both within democratic societies and as an agent of democracy.

The International Panel has set an agenda for UK sociology, which the Steering Group is happy to endorse and to recommend as providing the basis of a concerted professional response to ensure a robust future for the discipline which in turn will ensure that sociology can have the positive impact which it has the capacity to deliver.
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The British Sociological Association is the professional organisation representing sociologists in Britain.

Founded in 1951, our members are drawn from a wide range of backgrounds - research, teaching, students and practitioners in a variety of fields. The BSA provides a network of communication to all who are concerned with the promotion and use of sociology and sociological research.

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The Heads and Professors of Sociology Group (HAPS) is a forum for discussion and action related to educational policy concerning the development of sociology as a discipline. Its membership encompasses all Professors and Heads concerned with Sociology in the Higher Education Sector.

Website: www.britsoc.co.uk/about/HAPS

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