



**EVALUATION OF THE ESRC INTERNATIONAL
BENCHMARKING REVIEW SERIES**

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EVALUATION COMMITTEE

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1. Summary

1.1 The evaluation

This report presents Technopolis' evaluation of the Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC) series of International Benchmarking Reviews (IBR). Five reviews have been conducted since they began in 2005, covering Social Anthropology, Politics and International Studies, Economics, Sociology, and most recently Psychology.

The report is organised around the six core questions posed in the evaluation terms of reference, which are shown in the appendices:

- Assess the value for money of the international benchmarking series
- Provide an assessment of the robustness of the review methodology
- Summarise the key conclusions of the five reviews, and the impact that this has had
- Assess the contribution of learned societies to the reviews
- Compare the ESRC model with other similar reviews conducted in the UK and overseas
- Assess the overall success of the benchmarking review series

Our approach to the evaluation has comprised a mixture of desk research, stakeholder interviews and an online survey of review contributors and witnesses.

1.2 The robustness of the IBR methodology

We judge the International Benchmarking Review methodology to be robust and fit for purpose. The IBR approach is widely regarded by all stakeholders as being good practice and producing credible findings and recommendations. The international comparative analysis confirms the robustness of the ESRC approach.

The use of an international panel is entirely appropriate for carrying out an independent and authoritative assessment of the state of a discipline, and the ESRC and the learned societies have been successful in attracting experts of the highest calibre and constituting panels with the right mix of soft skills and specialisms.

1.3 Key conclusions and impacts

Overall, the four published reviews all concluded that a good part of their respective UK research community is involved in work that is worldclass, and that UK social scientists are influential on the global stage.

The panel recommendations relate to generic issues in the main; greater support for riskier research, more and better studentships and fellowships.

We found very little awareness of impacts attributable to the review process, amongst the members of the academic communities we interviewed or surveyed.

The ESRC senior management team did have a good view of outcomes, by contrast. The following are a few examples of ESRC responses:

- Economics IBR. Identified the need to re-build UK capacity in macroeconomics. In response, the Council worked with HM Treasury to announce funding for new studentships and postdoctoral fellowships in macroeconomics
- Anthropology IBR. Identified the need to encourage more 6th form students to consider studying the discipline at undergraduate level. In response, the Council provided financial support for the Royal Anthropological Institute's work to develop an A-level in anthropology, and to inform teachers and students about anthropology

- Politics IBR. Identified the need for greater concentration of postgraduate training to ensure high-quality provision. This recommendation formed part of the evidence used by the Council when creating its new network of Doctoral Training Centres

1.4 The contribution of the Learned Societies

We conclude that the partnership model is appropriate, and that the ESRC should continue to involve learned societies in framing reviews and helping to identify nominees for the panel chairperson and members.

The societies contributions were critical to the appointment of the panel chairs and have been important to the credibility and independence of the review process more generally.

There are attendant risks, as individual learned societies will have, by design, a particular agenda and will represent the interests of only some of the academic communities in scope. The ESRC has done well in managing those risks with its wide-ranging and open discussions with all learned societies, however some further improvements as regards the membership of the review steering committees would be desirable (research users, HEIs, lay members).

The learned societies have all made good use of the experience in launching working groups and running seminars at national conferences, however while the insight and debate is warmly welcomed there is little evidence of any concrete changes.

1.5 The IBR series in comparison with other similar reviews

The IBR series is state of the art and compares very favourably with the small selection of other international review procedures looked at as part of this review.

There is a great deal of overlap as regards the core approach – the international panel considering a broad mix of qualitative and quantitative evidence, tested through select-committee style hearings – and the core questions. There is broad alignment of pricing and timing too.

The only material difference between the ESRC approach and that of the other councils revolved around the dissemination and implementation of the review findings, where other research councils tend to treat this more formally, with a requirement to present the results at a national dissemination event, publish an official response to the advice (with action plan) and report on progress, periodically.

1.6 Value for money of the IBR series

The IBR series has provided the ESRC and its respective academic communities with good value for money, when judged against the quite reasonable implementation costs and the reported benefits to the ESRC in particular, and the learned societies too, albeit to a lesser extent.

There is no obvious alternative to the IBR series. The ESRC's thematic and programmatic evaluations are unlikely to engage and animate communities to the same degree as would a panel of eminent academic peers, critical friends. The national research assessment exercise (RAE2008, REF2014) misses the IBR's international dimension too, and is much less holistic and perceptive in its approach.

1.7 Overall success, lessons learned and future reviews

The ESRC approach to international peer review is believed to be best-in-class by a majority of those that have been closely involved with the IBR and other broadly analogous international exercises. The international comparison confirms the appropriateness of the IBR approach, showing the ESRC model aligns well with practice in other scientific nations.

The review outcomes – downstream success – are less visible to the community than is the genuine approval of the contributors.

The learned societies are unequivocal, arguing that the reviews have provided a valuable animation of disciplines and 'held up a mirror' to the disciplines themselves, which has been challenging in several instances. The politics review is perhaps the one area where UK contributors were less persuaded of its value, however that relates in large part to the very

different judgement rendered by the RAE some two years after the politics report was published.

The ESRC senior management team does continue to see great value in the review series. Successive reviews have allowed the ESRC officials to evolve the IBR methodology to the point where it is both efficient and robust.

The desk research, interviews and surveys suggest that the ESRC got the IBR approach right from the outset, in its basic parameters at least. An informed, peer review is the de facto international standard for these kinds of discipline reviews. The critical importance of the international panel has been confirmed time and again.

Other key success factors have emerged over time: dedicated high-quality support by a professional secretariat, wide-ranging and carefully structured evidence and the need to protect time for the panel to deliberate all it has read and heard.

In the five years or so since the first review was launched, the ESRC officers have learned many lessons, and have been fine-tuning the process continuously, to seek out efficiencies where they can and in particular to maximise the time the panel spends with the community.

There has been a succession of procedural refinements, based on the experience of running the early Reviews, which include in particular:

- The extension of the evidence base provided to Panels
- The simplification of logistics, basing the Panel in a single location and inviting witnesses to travel to attend Panel hearings

British social science is subject to very many checks and balances, from the appraisal of individual grant applications to the independent evaluation of its centres and programmes and on to the periodical, UK-wide assessment of all departments and disciplines through the RAE / REF.

However, the discipline-level perspective remains pretty much unique and the very great majority of contributors to this review believe the approach delivers valuable insight and experience. Moreover, with a cash price of around £150K, it is an incredibly economical means by which to engage UK social science in a critical dialogue and reflection about itself.

1.8 Our recommendations to the ESRC

We recommend the ESRC continue to implement international benchmarking reviews, at least until it has completed a full cycle of each of its core disciplines, and that it should continue to follow its current approach in broad measure.

We see several inter-related areas where the ESRC might usefully take action to further develop the IBR approach, which are to:

- Improve the standard dissemination arrangements, through a more substantive web presence, improved use of other media and the addition of a town-hall style event, at the conclusion of each review
- Add a formal commitment to the IBR 'standard operating procedures,' wherein the ESRC would publish a formal response to the findings and recommendations of each review within a reasonable period following the town hall meeting (e.g. 3 months)
- Improve the evidence base of the reviews, both with respect to the packaging and labelling of material, so the panel might better understand its relevance to the review process, and its provenance, and the quality and consistency of the individual elements
- Improve engagement with the academic community, to ensure a more comprehensive and representative set of contributions

Lastly, in recognition of the fact that improvements on the above dimensions is likely to add to the cost of a benchmarking exercise, while hopefully adding far more to the value derived, we recommend the ESRC reflect on the appropriateness of evolving its evidentiary requirements to align more closely with the evidence HEIs will be required to assemble for the forthcoming Research Excellence Framework (REF).

2. Introduction

2.1 This report

This report presents Technopolis' evaluation of the Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC) series of International Benchmarking Reviews (IBR). To date five reviews have been conducted since they began in 2005, covering Social Anthropology, Politics and International Studies, Economics, Sociology, and most recently Psychology.

It is more than five years since the IBR series was implemented in 2005/06 and the ESRC Evaluation Committee has asked for the procedure to be reviewed in order to determine the extent to which the approach has been a rigorous test of international standing and provided good value in respect to insight and resultant improvements. Moreover, this is a non-trivial exercise for the communities involved and it is appropriate to ask whether the assessments and improvement agenda might be pursued more efficiently.

The report presents the evaluation findings as regards the value and impact of the review series, and explores the extent to which the reviews are satisfactorily realising their principal objectives of benchmarking UK research against the best done worldwide and providing insights into research quality, impact and capacity issues in key UK social science disciplines.

The report is organised around the six core questions posed in the evaluation terms of reference, which are shown in the appendices:

- Assess the value for money of the international benchmarking series
- Provide an assessment of the robustness of the review methodology
- Summarise the key conclusions of the five reviews, and the impact that this has had
- Assess the contribution of learned societies to the reviews, and subsequent implementation of recommendations
- Compare the ESRC model with other similar reviews conducted in the UK and overseas
- Assess the overall success of the benchmarking review series

2.2 The approach

Our approach to the evaluation has comprised a mixture of desk research, stakeholder interviews and an online survey of review contributors and witnesses:

- Desk research. The individual Panel reports and supporting portfolio of evidence compiled by the ESRC review teams for the international benchmarking review panels. We have also looked at evaluation policies and reports from other similar benchmarking reviews conducted in the UK and overseas
- Stakeholder interviews. Semi-structured interviews with key figures from the international benchmarking review series, including past panel chairs, steering group chairs and appropriate ESRC representatives
- Community survey. An online survey of key stakeholders, including witnesses involved in the review meetings, international benchmarking review panel members and steering group members, seeking their opinion on each of the headline evaluation questions

3. The international benchmarking review series

3.1 Introduction

This section of the report provides a description of the International Benchmarking Review (IBR) series. It begins by explaining the background to the implementation of these discipline-level reviews, inaugurated in 2005, before going on to describe the basic IBR model or methodology. It ends with a brief statement about the key changes that have been made to the approach since its inception.

3.2 Background

In 2005, the ESRC embarked on a programme of International Benchmarking Reviews covering each of the key social science disciplines in turn, providing external verification of the quality and international standing of UK-based research in those areas.

The introduction of the new review series was prompted in large part by the then Office of Science and Innovation's (OSI) implementation of a new 'output' reporting procedure for all research councils, to track contributions to and progress against the objectives set out in the 10-year Science and Innovation Investment Framework 2004-2014. These are specified in the Treasury's Public Service Agreement for science (PSA4), and include a commitment to maintain the international standing of UK science as revealed through trends in aggregate and subject-specific citation statistics.

The IBR series was launched in order to address this public commitment. The Research Assessment Exercise has addressed the question of national research excellence, however its scope – in terms of the origins of funding for the research submitted – meant it was not an ideal basis from which to judge the contributions of specific Research Councils and it is an essentially domestic undertaking. The ESRC had furthermore explored its options for developing a bibliometrics-based approach to international benchmarking,¹ appropriate to the social sciences, and concluded that any affordable strategy would be insufficient to its needs and that an International Peer Review process was the most robust and credible solution.

The methodology, and format for the reviews, was based on the approach employed by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC), originally implemented in 1999.

As at winter 2010/2011, the ESRC had commissioned five reviews four of which are complete and published and the fifth will be published in spring 2011. Figure 1 lists the five reviews, and, and for each, names the learned societies that worked with the ESRC to carry out the review alongside the chair of the international panel and the chair of the steering group. The table also includes some basic data regarding the scale of ESRC

¹ Evaluating social science bibliometrics and research indicators (2006), Evidence Limited with Technopolis, a report to the ESRC.

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funding of research and training (annual expenditure for 2008/09) in each of the five areas, showing the focus on smaller disciplines in the first two reviews and core disciplines in the subsequent three.² Overall, the IBR series has carried out reviews of disciplines that account for almost 40% of the council's total support for research and training.³

² These figures were provided by the ESRC.

³ Copies of the published reports can be downloaded from the ESRC web site, at www.esrc.ac.uk/funding-and-guidance/tools-and-resources/impact-evaluation/international-benchmarking.aspx

Figure 1 International benchmarking reviews, completed or in progress

	Social Anthropology	Politics and International Studies	Economics	Sociology	Psychology
Published	2006	2007	2009	2010	2011 (forthcoming)
Learned societies	Association of Social Anthropologists (ASA) Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI)	Political Studies Association (PSA) British International Studies Association (BISA)	Royal Economic Society (RES) Committee of Heads of University Departments of Economics (CHUDE)	British Sociological Association (BSA) Heads and Professors of Sociology (HAPS)	British Psychological Society (BPS) Experimental Psychology Society (EPS) Association of Heads of Psychology Departments Also in partnership with: the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC), the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC), and the Medical Research Council (MRC)
Steering Group Chair and co-chair	Professor John Gledhill (ASA, University of Manchester)	Professor Jonathan Tonge (PSA, University of Liverpool)	Professor Sir John Vickers (RES, University of Oxford)	Professor John Holmwood (HAPS, University of Birmingham) Professor Sue Scott (BSA, Glasgow Caledonian University)	Professor Judi Ellis (BPS, University of Reading)
Review Panel Chair	Professor Don Brenneis (University of California at Santa Cruz)	Professor Robert Goodin (Australian National University)	Professor Elhanan Helpman (Harvard University)	Professor Helga Nowotny (European Research Centre)	Professor Max Coltheart (Macquarie University)
ESRC research expenditure (2008/09)	£2.5M (2.1% of all ESRC research spend)	£5.9M (5% of ESRC total)	£14.5M (12.2% of ESRC total)	£11.5M (9.7% of ESRC total)	£14.1M (11.9% of ESRC total)

ESRC training expenditure (2008/09)	£2.4M (4% of all ESRC training spend)	£4.3M (7.2% of ESRC total)	£4.7M (7.8% of ESRC total)	£6.2M (10.3% of ESRC total)	£7.1M (11.9% of ESRC total)
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3.3 The IBR model

3.3.1 The objectives of the International Reviews

The overarching objective for each review is to compare the position of the UK discipline with the best research worldwide, highlighting strengths and weaknesses where appropriate, and signalling any important issues that might reasonably be addressed by the ESRC or by the community more generally whether that be through the actions of its learned societies or individual HEIs.

The review methodology is built around a form of modified peer review, wherein renowned international experts make a judgement on the quality of research being undertaken in a given field in the UK, comparing its strengths and weaknesses with the quality of the best research in the field globally. Their report is based on a combination of oral evidence provided by individual witnesses attending panel hearings and written evidence, ranging from contextual descriptions of the field under review through to self-assessments submitted by individual departments.

In addition to benchmarking the quality of UK science, each Review examines the health of the discipline currently, seeking to identify any important, discipline-specific weaknesses as well as strengths. Lastly, the reviews should explore other key features including resource provision and non-academic impact, as well as any other issue that is deemed to be important in terms of the future development of the discipline (e.g. scientific leadership, young researchers, training, etc).

The exact focus of the individual reviews is expected to vary slightly, to reflect the particular the nature of the discipline being covered and the issues at hand.

3.3.2 Governance of the reviews

Given the ambition to produce conclusions and recommendations of relevance to the ESRC and to its academic communities, a governance structure was conceived that would help each Review engage researchers and facilitate ownership of the recommendations.

To that end, the reviews are undertaken at the behest of the ESRC but through a partnership between the research council and the relevant learned society or societies that cover the academic discipline in question.

In practical terms, this means the ESRC will approach the relevant learned societies to secure support for a review and to agree upon a chair and co-chair for a review steering group, which comprises senior representatives of the academic and research-user communities as well as the ESRC chief executive. The Steering Group is chaired by a prominent member of the principal learned society, and:

- Oversees the Review by agreeing the broad framework for the Review
- Appoints an International Panel to undertake the review

- Receives the International Panel's final report
- Agrees how to take forward the International Panel's conclusions and recommendations.

The ESRC's Evaluation Committee oversees the conduct of the programme overall, in order to assure consistency across the individual reviews and to bring together lessons learned.

3.3.3 The review methodology

Each Review is conducted by an International Panel consisting of between six and 10 members. Panel members are based exclusively at non-UK research organisations and are internationally-recognised experts in the discipline being reviewed. Care is taken to ensure that the Panel covers the key sub-disciplines of the discipline. One of the Panel members acts as Chair. He or she is responsible for leading the Panel through the review process, and for drafting the Panel's final report.

The Panel's evidence comes through two routes: a visit to the UK to meet with academics and early career researchers from across the discipline and based at a cross-section of departments; and a dossier of statistics, self-assessments and other evaluative material.

The visit is usually one week in length and typically includes in-depth meetings with representatives of each of the following stakeholder groups or 'witnesses:'

- Heads of department
- Experts in the key sub-disciplines
- Early-career researchers
- PhD students
- Users of research from the discipline being reviewed

Prior to the Panel's visit, a briefing pack is compiled by the ESRC. The data contained in the pack varies depending on the Panel's specific requirements, but usually would include:

- A statistical digest from ESRC, showing staffing levels and research funding
- Analytical papers, commissioned by the ESRC, which tend to include
 - A bibliometric analysis (field- and sub-field citation metrics, compared with the equivalent metrics for other countries and indeed other social science disciplines)
 - Specially commissioned overviews of the discipline's key sub-areas
 - A survey of non-academic users of research from the discipline
- Written submissions, prepared by key stakeholders and university departments

3.3.4 Panel composition and recruitment

Having recruited a Panel chairperson of international renown, he or she would then play a critical role in validating other nominations, making alternative suggestions and generally helping the Steering Group and the ESRC to construct a balanced group of experts with a good mixture of perspectives, sub-disciplines and gender. The person specification for the Panel chair is largely intuitive, but revolves around three qualities

- International standing and scientific reputation

- Their leadership qualities and judicious character
- Their familiarity with the UK environment and research landscape

The chairperson and members of the international panel are paid an honorarium of £10,000 and £5,000, respectively. The figures reflect an assumption that the chairperson will devote at least 20 person days to the review, while the other panel members might expect to contribute 10-person days (c. £500 a day). The honorarium whilst being seen as an important acknowledgement of the very substantial contribution being made by individuals was not thought to be a primary factor in causing people to agree to participate. Officers thought it would be counter-productive to eliminate or significantly reduce this fee, however, for reasons to do with fairness.

The ESRC officers did have a sense that panel members did not always make an equal contribution, and that in several cases members perhaps left too much of the business of the panel to the chairperson. They noted that in one case at least, a Panel Chairperson had invited individual members of the Panel to prepare a preliminary draft of a chapter or section of the overall report.

3.3.5 The report and implementation

Each Review Panel is required to prepare a written report, which is published following its approval by the Steering Group.

The report is organised around the Review questions, with the Panel findings presented in successive chapters on research quality, research capacity and research impact. The review sponsors then agree how to take forward the Panel's recommendations.

Each report is expected to be used in two ways:

- Strengthening the funding case. UK social science research needs to demonstrate its wider impact and international standing, in order to secure its funding base. Each Review should help to answer to these questions for a given area of social science research, as well as offering an opportunity for the discipline to showcase its work to a wider audience
- Developing the discipline. A review should help the profession and funders achieve a shared understanding of current strengths and weaknesses, and opportunities for development

Whilst there may be recommendations for the ESRC specifically, the findings should be of considerable relevance and value to the discipline more generally, including both the learned societies and individual university departments. For its part, the ESRC expects to use the findings from any single review to inform its discipline-specific support, and, looking across the reviews, to draw out critical issues or patterns, and to feed these insights into its strategic planning process.

4. The robustness of the IBR methodology

4.1 Introduction

This section of the report discusses the robustness of the IBR approach and in particular its ability to benchmark UK research quality against the best in the world.

It presents feedback from our interviews and survey on two aspects, beginning with the robustness of the methodology, when viewed from the perspective of the core review questions, and a discussion of the appropriateness of the review process or arrangements. It concludes with a presentation of feedback on possible improvements.

4.2 Methodological robustness

Our online survey invited all review participants to rate the robustness of the review methodology as regards each of the core questions. Specifically, the extent to which the IBR approach was able to: reliably benchmark UK research against the best worldwide; reveal the key strengths and weaknesses of the discipline in the UK; and identify future challenges and opportunities.

We asked respondents to use a simple 5-point scale to indicate the level of their agreement or disagreement with the notion of methodological robustness, where a 5 signified strong agreement (it is a robust approach). The aggregate response obtained across all subject areas is shown in Figure 2.⁴

Figure 2 Robustness of the International Benchmarking Review approach (n = 101)

Areas	1 or 2 (low)	3 (medium)	4 or 5 (high)
Benchmark UK research quality against best in the world	5%	14%	81%
Reveal key strengths	2%	12%	86%
Identify principal weaknesses	6%	24%	70%
Identify the sustainability of research capacity	8%	31%	61%
Identify challenges and opportunities for UK in next 10 years	12%	31%	57%
Identify impacts on policy or practice	14%	41%	45%

Technopolis survey, November 2010

As Figure 2 shows, a majority of respondents regard the IBR approach as a robust means by which to answer each of a review's principal questions, with the exception of non-academic impacts where the great majority consider the approach reasonable or better.

Crucially, 95% of respondents rate the approach as a reasonable to robust means by which to benchmark the international standing of a discipline nationally. The approach is also widely regarded as being a robust means by which to reveal the key strengths of a particular

⁴ The survey was directed to all named individuals that had been invited to contribute as witnesses to the five reviews as well as all members of the international panel and steering groups that we were unable to interview. Ultimately, we obtained 104 replies, 93 from witnesses and 11 from panel members. The distribution of replies was skewed towards the most recent reviews, and given we obtained only a very small number of replies for anthropology and politics we elected to present all of the results in aggregate rather than by discipline or by type of respondent. We did look at the results in a more disaggregated fashion, and have selectively commented on any self-evidently noteworthy points where those arose.

community's work. Interestingly a significantly smaller majority view the approach as a good means by which to reveal principal weaknesses nationally.

The IBR approach is less well regarded as a means by which to determine key issues about the future (sustainability and challenges). Prospective analyses are always going to be more uncertain and more challenging methodologically than a review of the current situation, inasmuch as one is talking about things that are yet to happen, where external factors need to be researched and modelled and contingencies made to allow for unforeseeable events. From this perspective, the IBR approach is constrained: it addresses several fundamental factors internal to the discipline (quality of people, quality / topicality of their work, institutional support, etc), but does not cover wider issues and does not entail the sort of deliberative approach deployed in the best foresight and road-mapping exercises.

The series did least well in terms of the confidence respondents placed on its ability to identify where research had had an impact on policy or practice. This might reflect scepticism across the social science research community as regards the robustness of any methodology when it comes to detailing research impacts on policy or practice. A methodological challenge that would likely be exacerbated by the notion of benchmarking the nature and extent of non-academic impacts attributable to a discipline in one country with the range of quality of impacts typical in similar communities in other countries.

The chairs of the panels and the steering groups were even more emphatic, arguing that the approach was more than adequate to benchmark UK science against the best work internationally. The combination of an international panel of renowned experts and comprehensive qualitative and quantitative data was thought to be entirely appropriate.

The chairs offered two qualifications, which were the critical dependence of the approach on the international panel, and specifically the calibre and composition of its membership, and the sufficiency of the contextual data and analyses.

A small minority of contributors did raise concerns, during our interviews or through their written responses, about the reliability of peer review, and its ability to systematically and critically review all aspects of work being carried out in the discipline in question.

- The peer review process has tended to result in rather cautious conclusions, with few surprises or challenging positions taken. The Sociology Review was thought to be the exception, being rather more forthright in tone. This rather conservative quality is thought to be the result, in part at least, of the consensual nature of the committee process and partly due to the challenge of systematically assessing the international standing of what are larger and varied undertakings. The unavoidable limitations in available data (gaps and incompatibilities) do quite reasonably lead Panels to focus its critique on those areas that are more fully described and understood (prior, expert knowledge)
- The panel composition was felt to be a potential issue too, with several people arguing that the focus of the resulting report, and possibly the conclusions too, might have been rather different had there been a different chair and different panel. While the panels are populated by experts of international renown, resident outside the UK, there is a sense that peers are well known to the UK academic community and that there is substantial interplay between their respective work

4.3 The appropriateness of the IBR arrangements

The online survey went on to ask a second set of questions related to the appropriateness of the review arrangements. We asked contributors to rate each of seven aspects of the process on robustness, once again using a simple scale, from one to five, where five indicates strong agreement with the statement that a given aspect of the study design is entirely appropriate and robust. The aggregate response is shown in Figure 3, with the sub-questions sorted in descending order based on the proportions of respondents scoring 4s or 5s.

Figure 3 How robust is the Review process? (n=99)

Area	1 or 2 (low)	3 (medium)	4 or 5 (high)
The governance arrangements	3%	10%	88%
The role, competence or composition of the International Panel	2%	11%	87%
The scope of the Review and its core questions	2%	15%	82%
The hearings / witnesses presenting to the Review Panel	5%	21%	73%
Organisation of the review e.g. itinerary, visits, poster sessions	8%	22%	70%
Other evidence provided to the Review Panel	4%	33%	63%
The departmental submissions, provided to the Review Panel	8%	29%	63%

Technopolis survey, November 2010

Figure 3 shows that the great majority of respondents believe the individual elements of the study design were indeed robust.

The responses suggest almost universal satisfaction with the IBR remit and core questions, its governance arrangements (ESRC working with the learned societies to guide the international panel) and the role, competence and composition of the International Panel, with only two or three individuals expressing dissatisfaction. The series is slightly less widely regarded in terms of the witness presentations for the Review Panel and the organisation of the Review, although the difference was slight with at least 70% of the respondents rating it as a four or a five. The reviews generated most uncertainty around the sufficiency of the departmental submissions and other evidence provided, where almost 40% of respondents made either neutral or negative responses.

Once again, we checked to see if there were any significant points of divergence or disagreement evident in the answers when looked at for the specific subject areas and when considering the replies of panel members as compared with other types of contributor, and did not find any.

In addition to the tick-box question, all respondents were invited to provide a written comment outlining any practicable change they would recommend to the ESRC, which might improve the robustness of the methodology. Around 75 people provided a response to this open question, with around 20 of those individuals stating that they could foresee no obvious, practicable improvements. Most people simply wrote 'none' or none that wouldn't involve a great deal more expense, but several people were more fulsome in their replies. The following is an especially positive account.

I have to say I was impressed throughout with the design and implementation of this review. Congratulations. Arrangements for participation were superb, the panel chair was truly excellent and the meeting I attended, chaired by Prof Collins, was very adeptly handled. I think the practice of eliciting qualitative statements, followed by the focus groups of HoDs, students and subject experts worked well and insured comprehensive coverage. The resulting reports seemed fair and helpful.

Just two respondents suggested the review process was flawed, both arguing that the IBR approach was too light for the job at hand while acknowledging that ESRC probably couldn't justify, possibly afford, the cost of carrying out a more systematic and exhaustive international benchmark of an entire discipline in a country the size of the UK.⁵

⁵ We received a written reply from one panel member, who declined to answer the questionnaire, but nonetheless offered a brief critique of the IBR approach. In short, this respondent believes the review process – and the wider science policy context in the UK – is overly technocratic and that the growing fascination with a shortlist of recent constructs – citation rates, best practice, policy impact – risks losing sight of the central purpose of higher education, which should be providing students with the wherewithal of critical thinking. This contributor went on to state that

4.4 The added value of the IBR series

We invited respondents to tell us what they see as being the unique contribution of the IBR series, in comparison with other assessments carried out by ESRC (e.g. programme evaluations or analyses or project outputs) or other UK funding bodies (e.g. RAE / REF assessments of quality and impact).

Around 40 people provided a response to this question, and their answers were pretty consistent within and between the different subject areas.

Almost half of all replies pointed to the discipline-level perspective of the review, with most of these commentators adding that this is a unique perspective that has a great deal of value to the communities in question. The RAE / REF does deal with fields of course, however it is concerned with institutions in the first instance and fiercely contested; the IBR series by comparison provides a big-picture perspective that is of considerable interest to individual academics, wherever they are in their career, to departments, to funders and to government.

In around a quarter of cases, people see the international aspects as the defining feature and once again this is seen by almost everyone as unique, amongst UK review processes. The international character is seen as strongly positive for several reasons, beginning with the greater critical independence one can achieve through a panel of non-nationals through to insight that can derive from substantive international comparisons. Several people also mentioned the warm glow of affirmation when panels do confirm the excellence and international standing of our national endeavours, and the positive impact that can have on a communities self-esteem and indeed on the perceptions of third parties whether that is in other disciplines / departments and even in central government.

Several people stated, rather boldly perhaps, that the IBR process was altogether better than the process followed by the RAE, with a more holistic approach overall (e.g. evaluation questions, inputs, evidence), stronger panels and sharper international quality benchmarks. One person took the opposing view, arguing that the process offered little of value over and above the RAE / REF.

Lastly, several people remarked that many of the most positive qualities of the IBR approach, with its rather holistic view of the world, its focus on disciplines rather than institutions and its disconnect from direct funding, might reduce its relevance in the challenging financial environment faced by social sciences in 2011.

4.5 Methodological challenges and possible improvements

More than 50 survey respondents made suggestions for possible methodological improvements, around 110 recommendations in total, of which perhaps 10 were repeated more than once, and no suggestion was made more than half-a-dozen times.

Better evidence was perhaps the most frequent suggestion, with perhaps 15 people recommending some improvement to the evidence base, broadly defined, whether that was the consistency of the area reports or the depth of the bibliometrics.

The following bullets synthesise the main suggestions, with the issues grouped around the core elements of the review process:

- On governance, two contributors and one panel member remarked on the potential risks of bias with the current arrangements, suggesting that a reliance on a small number of eminent (hard working and judicious) individuals might unduly influence the shape of the panel and the focus of the work and the tone of the final report. There was a call to open up the process to broader oversight by the community at large. There was a similar anxiety about the close involvement of the ESRC, in the review process itself, and a

various important observations made by different panellists – like the nature of the relationship between research and teaching – did not make it into the final report, again pointing to a narrowness of scope and ambition on the part of the process overall.

suggestion that it might be more appropriate were the Council to take a more distant role, simply maintaining the rules of the game and formally responding to a panel report. There are various countervailing arguments, however, which suggest the close involvement of the senior officers of the learned societies facilitates the recruitment of eminent international peers and the engagement of the wider community, while the ESRC's involvement was seen by many as smoothing progress

- On panel membership, three contributors remarked on the need for a slightly more open and transparent appointments process, to improve credibility, while two others argued future panels needed to be somewhat larger if they were to cover all relevant sub-disciplines and ensure a more systematic or balanced treatment of the entire discipline. This last point is echoed in the observations of five contributors regarding the choice of sub-area reviews and indeed panel working groups, which were thought to be a little odd and possibly reflecting subjective factors like panel membership, idiosyncrasies of the commissioned authors and the specialty of the people coordinating departmental submissions. People recognise that larger panels and more systematic / exhaustive treatment will increase costs
- On core questions, there was really only a comment about the need to ensure that each of the review's core questions are addressed, with two individuals remarking that the process as constituted made a rather better job of revealing strengths and was less good at identifying and exploring weaknesses. The solution to this was part process and part evidentiary, with a suggestion that panels, departmental submissions and area reports might benefit from a little more structure or discipline – a section for each core question – and more importantly, for weaknesses, the panel and the community needed a more comprehensive (depth and breadth) bibliometrics assessment of all sub-fields performance, to focus debate rather than conclude it. There was also a suggestion that the issue of non-academic impacts could be more suitably addressed through impact case studies rather than narrow statements and anecdote
- On evidence, five people suggested there was a need to provide the panels – and contributors – with more comprehensive and exacting bibliometric analyses at the sub-field level (normalised against average citation rates for the field globally, but also reporting UK shares of the most cited papers at the 10% level or higher), ahead of the visits. Three people remarked on the apparently arbitrary choice of sub-area reports and the rather inconsistent presentation of these documents, and suggested ESRC should commission work that was less idiosyncratic and possibly insist on its being peer-reviewed in order to have greater confidence in its representativeness and quality. When one looks more closely at the material provided to panels it is clear that not all of the papers have been commissioned by the ESRC and while they are deemed to have content that is relevant to the review, they were written for other purposes. Four people suggested that a community survey of some kind – addressing researchers at all stages of the career, and including UK citizens working as researchers overseas – would be a valuable additional resource that would complement the institutional perspective. Lastly, three people remarked on the limitations of the departmental submissions, arguing these documents were rather variable in quality and coverage (of the review questions) and in some cases bore the imprimatur of the senior academic coordinating the submission. There was a suggestion that the template should be accompanied by further advice on good practice – involvement of the faculty more generally for example – and might reasonably include an external quality assurance step, ahead of the material being submitted to the panel
- On the hearings, three contributors remarked on what they saw as the peculiar choice of sub-groups, and expressed a desire to see these mini-panels organised more formally and comprehensively around more conventional sub-fields or themes. Others asked that institutions be given earlier notice of the dates for the panel's visit and that ESRC should seek to encourage departments to more fully engage staff, at all levels, with better briefings regarding primary purpose, issues to be discussed and reporting / feedback on the results. Several people asked ESRC to consider ways in which the interview process might be expanded to include contributions from more people. Two panellists, in turn, suggested that they too would have liked to meet with a larger number of people and a

better cross-section, as individual interviewees, impressive as they were, are going to be somewhat limited even partisan in their presentation

- On resources scheduling and scheduling, four panellists remarked on the challenge of 'fitting it all in' in the space of a week, and that as presently organised they were not able to see as many institutions or people as they would wish. To add further to the pressure, three panellists said they felt the balance was wrong between the time devoted to visits / hearings and time devoted deliberations within the panel, in one case arguing that a 60:40 split would be more appropriate and make most of the panel's expertise and reflections
- On dissemination and implementation, there were just two comments wherein departmental witnesses, other than the coordinators, felt somewhat removed from the process, as regards its purpose, requirements upon them and its outcomes
- Other suggestions included a recommendation for closer interaction with the funding councils and the REF, in an effort to benefit from their substantial investments in classifying and defining research attributes, like non-academic impact, which would also permit institutions to make more comprehensive submissions without incurring substantially increased costs

Taken together, the statistics and open comments suggest that the IBR process is well regarded and that opportunities for improvement are mostly incremental refinements.

To bring the discussion of robustness to a close, we invited contributors to provide any other observations or comments that they wished to make. In the event around 40 respondents provided a further brief comment, the majority of which were a replay of remarks made by others in response to the preceding question.

Around 10 people took the opportunity to compliment the ESRC on the IBR approach overall and in particular the eminence / composition of the international panel, which several went on to say, was absolutely critical to the success of such a process.

The Anthropology Review was an excellent and well-considered exercise, conducted by an international panel that seemed in touch with the realities of HE in the UK as they were at the time. Its findings have been important for the discipline as a whole, and it was well worth doing. Alas, institutional memories are very short, however, and if there were some way of conveying to institutions the cumulative results of the Reviews -- so that past results were kept in mind too -- that would be even more helpful.

The panel was very well chosen, possessing the experience of worldwide research required to compare the UK to other countries. In the meeting I attended they listened carefully to all opinions offered and gave thoughtful and informed responses, directing an interesting and illuminating discussion.

Moreover, five people that expressed concern about the robustness of the process, cited anxieties about the size and composition of the panels and the feasibility of such a group engaging completely and even-handedly with all sub-fields. Two went on to say that perhaps we should be content that the panels and the process make a self-evidently good job of identifying the highs and the lows.

Three people remarked on the value the exercise had had in helping the community prepare for the last RAE, and in the case of Social Anthropology, reportedly contributing positively to an improved outcome as compared with the previous exercise in 2001. The politics review proved rather more contentious in this regard, with the panel report praising the discipline's international standing a year or so ahead of the RAE2008 producing a discipline-wide profile that saw the community languishing in the lower orders and losing QR income. The sociologists saw the review as having been timely for that discipline, feeding into discussions about the importance of the social sciences with the new government and providing a better platform for institutional discussions about future priorities and tough decisions.

Three people remarked on the somewhat unfocused and anecdotal quality of the panel discussions, with one person wondering aloud whether the witnesses had come to give

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evidence or to listen to the exploits of these world-famous individuals. Yet another suggested there might be value in using professional facilitators to oversee the process and reduce the risk of getting lost in tangential discussions or individuals dominating proceedings. Elsewhere contributors saw the working groups as potentially problematic, not only because one might lose the procedural expertise and discipline of the chair but also because working in twos and threes is likely to mean there is only one real peer involved in the discussions, with all the potential risks that poses.

Lastly, several people signalled caution around what one respondent described as an obsession with comparing ourselves with the US, to the exclusion of other possibly more instructive comparators.

5. Key conclusions and impacts

5.1 Introduction

This section of the report presents an overview of the key conclusions and recommendations produced by the four completed reviews, which the study team has compiled based on textual analysis of the individual review reports.

The analysis is organised around the IBR questions on for example research quality and capacity, and is presented here as a reference for readers and as the basis for commenting on any important patterns therein.

These digested tables were also used by the study team in our fieldwork, providing us with a simple reference to guide our discussions with stakeholders as regards subsequent action and impacts, and to invite survey respondents to rate the importance of a given conclusion or recommendation (e.g. what did stakeholders learn from the reviews that was not known already?).

5.2 Key conclusions and recommendations

Figure 4 presents an overview of the main conclusions for each of the four published reports, which the study team extracted, and as such there is some small risk that key points have been missed or that the significance of issues has been diminished in this abridge version. The digested material is organised around the headline questions posed by each review.

Overall, the reviews all concluded that a good part of their respective UK research community is involved in work that is worldclass, and that UK social scientists are influential on the global stage. That said, the quality-related conclusions are quite limited in scope and rather variable in their format and language:

- The Economics Review is the only one of the four reviews that made a categorical statement confirming the international standing of UK economics research overall, and its world leadership in several core disciplines
- The other three reviews were rather more discursive and listed areas where the UK communities were deemed to be especially strong. The Anthropology Review asserts the UK's influence globally, arguing it is a world leader in a long list of sub-fields. There appears to be an issue more generally, where many of the conclusions are relative statements about performance within the UK, as compared with the best research around the globe
- Each of the reports flagged thematic weaknesses, whether that was macroeconomics and finance (economics) or quantitative research methods (sociology). There are few strong patterns evident across the conclusions of the four Reviews, although at the risk of over-interpretation one might argue the reviews have each highlighted, as both a strength and a weakness, two issues, which are empiricism on the one hand and English language / linguistic issues on the other
- Capacity issues are dealt with at considerable length, although again the particularities of the disciplines and the varied styles of the authors does militate against a neat synthesis of conclusions. There is no clear position as regards the vitality of each discipline in the UK as compared with its counterparts elsewhere and much of the feedback here was concerned with perceived shortcomings, for example, about what were judged to be the limited opportunities for doctoral students and early career researchers and the undue burden on exporter disciplines. The sociology review devoted a great deal of attention to discussing issues of identify and fragmentation and pondered the risks to the discipline in the longer term of its backward colonisation by other disciplines
- The reviews dealt only lightly with non-academic impacts, struggling somewhat with the limited material that was presented. There were obvious benefits to the wider community

through the recruitment of specialists (post-grads) trained in our universities. For anthropology, the panel noted there were many British-trained social scientists who were clearly very active and well placed in a large number of international agencies and doing important work there. The economics panel noted the presence of many UK-trained postgraduates in international financial institutions and policy environments. The sociology and politics panels noted similar sorts of benefits within public administration and public services more generally. There was no meaningful comparison of relative impact, which is to say the impact of British social science as compared with Australian, German or US social science

- The discussion of future opportunities and challenges was treated rather briefly and focused on policy and funding issues for the most part, so for example, the need to fund a greater proportion of research that is imaginative or risky, and the need to provide more and better support for research students and young researchers. The economics and sociology reviews argued that concerted efforts were required on macroeconomics and quantitative research methods respectively

Figure 5 presents our abridged version of the recommendations set out within the four Reviews are more closely aligned than were the review findings, albeit they remain quite wide-ranging. It is also true that very many recommendations relate to generic issues – greater support for riskier research, more and better studentships and fellowships – rather than discipline specific concerns. The following bullet points provide an overview of the sorts of recommendations made:

- On research quality three of the four Reviews made concrete suggestions, one thematic, one methodological and one about novelty: Macroeconomics requires strengthening. Sociological methodologies need to be realigned. Anthropology needs more imaginative proposals
- Capacity issues are concerned with researcher training for the most part, with three of the four Reviews suggesting more might usefully be done to expand or strengthen doctoral training programmes (more scholarships and better financial support), as compared with existing arrangements. The Sociology Review was the one exception, making no recommendations in this realm. The Politics Panel made recommendations for improved capacity development spanning the lifecycle of a typical research career, from bursaries to studentships to fellowships. None of the other panels made a strong point within the conclusions and recommendations about support for mid-career researchers
- The sociology review called for the ESRC and the community to work together to strengthen the institutional organisation of sociology as a discipline, while preserving its intellectual diversity
- Public visibility emerged as an issue for three of the reviews, with panels arguing that disciplines needed to do much more to showcase their work and the results of their work, bringing it to the attention of funders, policy makers and the public

Figure 4 Overview of conclusions taken from the four completed benchmarking reviews

	Social Anthropology	Politics and International Relations	Economics	Sociology
Q u a l i t y	Found that the UK is a world leader in 14 areas (incl. Kinship, Medical Anthropology, Material Culture) and that pluralism is an important source of strength. Also identified weaknesses: UK tends to foreground empirical approaches over theory, there is an absence of linguistic influences, tend to focus on minority cultures over 'majoritarian' ones.	Found consensus around areas of UK strength (e.g. political theory, electoral studies, international studies, incl. EU studies) and areas of relative weakness (language-based areas and methodological techniques). Panel noted that ESRC addressing areas of weaknesses but schemes to do this need more promotion. Panel noted lack of 'big ideas' (confirmed by bibliometrics) and suggested ESRC sends clearer signals to community that it is willing to fund such ventures	The panel starts with a broad evaluation of the bibliography / citation data and concludes that UK Economics is very good by world standards and that in microeconomics it is the world leader. The panel then evaluates each sub-discipline on a case-by-case basis.	The boundaries of Sociology have begun to fragment due to administrative location of sociology within the institutional structures in traditional disciplinary units. The panel then moves through selected thematic areas in UK sociology, commenting on their strengths and weaknesses individually. The panel found that UK has an advantage because it speaks English, but that it must not become complacent' as this will be eroded by other countries learning English. Students are not well trained in quantitative methods. Sociology is predominantly white and male.
C a p a c i t y	Despite the lack of A-level in Anthropology and the limited funding for PhDs, undergraduate enrolment is still healthy. The jobs prospects of graduates are job because of its success as an 'exporter' discipline. ⁶ PhD funding schemes are too short. The panel recommend funding smaller, 'riskier' projects. Low salaries make appointing senior staff difficult.	PhD funding should be conditional on the students having two members on their advisory panel. There is no looming 'retirement crisis,' however, there is a lack of women and ethnic minorities. The panel suggest a 'rescue fellowship' for promising scholars failing to progress to full careers and a 'retooling' bursary for academics who change direction or whose skills have eroded. The panel note a 'two-track profession' arising because some teaching contacts do not include research. The UK has strong networks with US and Europe, but is weaker at interdisciplinary networks, esp. with Economics. The panel recommend funding highly select specialised workshops.	The panel note that there is an increasing number of Economists under Business departments and it is unclear how that will affect the direction of the discipline.	Career prospects are insecure due to shortage of teaching posts and the time between PhD and a teaching post is longer than some other countries. However, Sociology is strong as an 'exporter' discipline. There may be a retirement crisis. Sociology does well in funding except in grant applications. The panel applaud the contribution UK Sociology has made in terms of data sets.

⁶ In practical terms, we understand an 'exporter discipline' to be a cognate discipline where there is a net outflow of trained researchers and early-career researchers to other disciplines and research settings often interdisciplinary (e.g. management research) and possibly even outside academia (e.g. government social researchers).

	Social Anthropology	Politics and International Relations	Economics	Sociology
I m p a c t	The panel found that Anthropology teaches students how to think laterally. They found that UK SA has more cultural impact than elsewhere (e.g. has more key figures in human rights work, policy consultations).	Found that the UK is strong at giving practical policy advice and has good links to government, the military, business etc. However, departments do not have good websites. The panel suggest 10% of bursaries should be for dissemination. They advise ESRC clarify its position on funding 'risky' projects.	Found that there is unevenness as to the 'usefulness' of the sub-fields. However, they do not feel it is realistic to expect an academic research portfolio to exactly match the needs of non-academic institutions and that Economics broadly has a good track record in terms of impact. They also suggest that the government can influence that direction of research through the funding that is not a block grant.	Found that from the users perspective, the work that is produced is useful and of a high calibre: their principle objection is that it is hard to access. The RAE assessments tend to act as a deterrent for academics to work with business because the work cannot be submitted afterward. RAE has unexpected results, including divulging more power to institutional managers.
F u n d i n g	The panel reiterate the issues surrounding funding, appropriate post-doctoral support and the challenges of hiring senior staff. They argue that it is important to create stability of the discipline through times of administrative change. Social Anthropology's achievements need to be given recognition.	Found that it is important to allocate resources to the best departments and so endorse the dual-funding structure, although they are aware this may cause a 'two-tier university system. They sanction the increasing numbers of international students.	-	A primary challenge surrounds the identity of Sociology and whether its 'core' will be eroded over time. Another is whether Sociology will strike the right balance between quantitative and qualitative sides. The UK is well placed to be an international leader, but is missing some topical subjects like the Environment.

Figure 5 Overview of recommendations taken from the four completed benchmarking reviews

	Social Anthropology	Politics and International studies	Economics	Sociology
Research quality	Greater encouragement of imaginative and promising research proposals Actively encourage imaginative and promising proposals using small responsive grants.	-	Macroeconomics requires strengthening, because it is a core subject of the discipline and it is lacking in a number of dimensions in the UK. Although microeconomic theory is doing better than macroeconomics, it too needs improvement in order to fulfil its mission as a core subject.	Bring sociological research methodologies in closer alignment with institutional and international state-of-the-art standards such as quantitative methods

	Social Anthropology	Politics and International studies	Economics	Sociology
Research quality	-	-	The fields can only be improved with the recruitment of high-quality scholars and not research funds alone. For this reason research funds should be tied to recruitment.	Provide incentives for developing international cooperation, training and comparative research
Doctoral and post-doctoral support	Stronger Postgraduate support There is not enough funding for undergraduates wishing to continue so the ESRC should expand postgraduate student support.	Expand ESRC bursaries for short courses in advanced methods training to be made available to staff as well as students, and to foreign as well as all domestic students. Better dissemination of information about existing bursaries and training options, and expansion of the number of bursaries available to anyone who would benefit could be offered one.	The Panel supports the move to a 2+2 format of postgraduate education. In addition they recommend fully supporting selected talented Ph.D. students.	-
Doctoral and post-doctoral support	The development of a broader range of support for post-doctoral fellows – incl. enabling post-docs to return to the field for further research, provide teaching opportunities and providing time to write.	The panel endorse quotas in allocation of ESRC studentships and recommend that all ESRC-funded students have supervisory panels consisting of not less than two members.	Enhance the training of Ph.D. students through co-operative networks of economic departments, and countrywide specialised Ph.D. courses offered in the Spring or Summer.	-
Support to mid-career researchers	-	Research fellowships to be funded at levels sufficient to make them truly useful. They recommend Post-doctoral Fellowships of 2-year or 3-years' duration. They recommend Professorial Fellowships with up to 80-100 per cent buyouts. Early-mid-career Research Fellowships for people 5 years post-PhD to establish their own research programme, perhaps lasting as long as 3-5 years.	-	-

	Social Anthropology	Politics and International studies	Economics	Sociology
Diversity	-	Vigorous proactive strategies to remedy the under-representation of women, particularly in senior ranks, and ethnic minorities across all ranks.	-	-
Research funding strategies	The development of funding strategies that promote multi-sited research strategies - The ESRC should also consider larger responsive grants for more complex or transnational fieldwork that cannot be completed in a grant the size that is currently available.	Funders incl. the ESRC support more risky and innovative research that has no immediately foreseeable practical payoffs. Funders to take vigorous measures to publicize their willingness to fund such research.	-	Define "Impact measurements" and criteria to maximize the actual societal impacts of sociology
Research funding strategies	-	The panel endorse the concentration of research funding. They recommend that research quality not be assessed by metrics alone, but rather by panels of scholars capable of reading and judging work for themselves when metrics might be misleading.	Curiosity-driven research should not be discouraged by the format of submissions of research proposals, such as the requirement of references from final users of research output. The ESRC needs to inform researchers that such references are not mandatory and should be provided only when appropriate.	-
Institutional structures	-	-	-	Strengthen the institutional organisation of sociology as a discipline, while preserving its intellectual diversity
Public engagement	Better awareness of impact. Additionally, the significant contribution made by Social Anthropology to policy and practice would be better recognised if Anthropologists became more comfortable in pointing to their and their colleagues' accomplishments.	A stronger web presence for better dissemination of research. The already-strong engagement with non-academic users to be further enhanced through 'knowledge brokers' being associated with research projects and centres.	-	Enhance sociology's public standing through reinforcing its visibility and authority outside academia

	Social Anthropology	Politics and International studies	Economics	Sociology
Public engagement	Improving the academic skills of practitioners: support practitioners for short residential fellowships in university departments.	Funders incl. the ESRC to take a broader view of engagement, embracing not only immediate impact on policy but also more diffuse impacts on public culture. ESRC to take vigorous measures to publicise its willingness to fund research, promising impacts of that broader sort.	-	-

5.3 Actions and impacts

In order to gauge the extent to which the review findings had been acted upon, we asked survey respondents to rate the significance of the key conclusions and to indicate those where they believed there had been an impact on the respective research communities.

To facilitate the feedback process, we included specific recommendations for each of the four panels that had published reports at the time of the survey (so not for the psychology review), albeit using the same overarching questions about novelty or insight of the findings and recommendations, awareness of any follow-up action and the wider impact of the reviews.

The first question we asked of the contributors to the four completed reviews was to what extent they agreed that the conclusions reached by ‘their’ Panel had been insightful and in some way additional to what was already accepted by the community? Of those who answered, only 5% indicated they had no opinion on the panel conclusions. Figure 6 presents the distribution of opinion across the 55 individuals that did have a view.

Figure 6 To what extent were the conclusions reached by the Panel insightful and produced findings additional to what was already known or accepted by the community? (n=55)

Very low	Low	Medium	High	Very High
0%	4%	31%	45%	20%

Technopolis survey, November 2010

We see here that most people found that the conclusions were in some way additional and insightful, with just under a third registering a neutral ‘medium’ rating and only a tiny fraction as ‘low.’

The next question we asked (not Panel members) invited respondents to express an opinion as to whether a specific recommendation had led to any specific actions for improvement.

Around half of all respondents stated they had *no* view as to whether the panel recommendations had been acted upon or not. This outturn suggests the ESRC might need to look at its communications and ongoing reporting of progress with specific action plans, as there has been follow-on activity, but apparently these efforts are not widely known.

There were differences between the subjects on this issue: slightly more than half of the respondents involved with the Sociology or Economics reviews reported themselves as being unaware of further action at the time of writing. In marked contrast, perhaps reflecting the longer period of elapsed time, the great majority of people involved with the Politics review did have a view as to whether the recommendations had been implemented.

Figure 7 summarises the balance of opinion amongst that sub-set of respondents that do have a view of subsequent actions, split across the four subject reviews.

Figure 7 Where have Panel recommendations led to specific actions for improvement? (n=56)

Subject Review	Action Taken	No Action Taken
Social Anthropology	29%	71%
Politics and International Studies	56%	44%
Economics	63%	37%
Sociology	71%	29%
Total	60%	40%

Technopolis survey, November 2010

We see in this table that there are large differences in opinion about whether action has been taken between the different subjects, although the small number of replies for anthropology and for politics does demand caution around the interpretation of the results.

It is important to remember that as we look down the table, the subject Reviews become more recent and that the ESRC and Sociology community has not had as long to implement the

Sociology panel's key conclusions as their counterparts have for Social Anthropology. Nonetheless, it does appear as though the inverse of what we might predict has happened and that despite the shorter timeframe, a greater proportion of the community believes actions have been taken, as compared with the earlier reviews. It is not clear why this might be the case. Whether, for example it is because the review process has evolved, with improved communications on the one hand and a more determined commitment to act on the recommendations on the other, or that the later panels, under the supervision of the steering committee, did a rather better job in identifying practicable recommendations.

The following tables present the results for each of the four reviews, in chronological order. And while the number of responses is rather small at this level of aggregation, there are noteworthy differences in the balance of opinion – followed up or not – by recommendation, within a single discipline.

Figure 8 Which of the Social Anthropology Panel's recommendations have led to specific actions for improvement? (n=6)

Recommendation	Action Taken	No Action Taken
Encourage anthropologists to state publicly their accomplishments	83%	17%
Increase funding for postgraduate training	33%	67%
Provide more response-mode grants for complex / multi-site proposals	33%	67%
Develop a broader range of post-doctoral fellowships	0%	100%
Support practitioners with short residential fellowships	0%	100%
Increase numbers of imaginative / higher-risk proposals	0%	100%

Technopolis survey, November 2010

Figure 8 presents the results for Social Anthropology and one can see immediately that in three of six cases, all of our respondents believe no action was taken. A majority also believe no further action has been taken in respect to post-graduate training or complex, multi-site projects.

The exception to this, where there appeared to be wide agreement that action had been taken, was the recommendation that Anthropologists should be encouraged to publicly state their achievements. The idea behind this recommendation was to tackle some of the negative side effects that 'exporter' disciplines like Anthropology suffer from. One of the principal problems exporter disciplines suffer from is that many graduates who were trained in Anthropology go on to find jobs such as working with human rights or epidemiology are in fact still working as Anthropologists, but will often publish under the wider subject discipline, in this case law and medicine. This recommendation was directed to the Steering Group in the round, to the ESRC and to the learned societies, who presumably have been able to effectively disseminate this message.

It is arguable that the other recommendations are more challenging (more money, different selection criteria, different balance of investments) inasmuch as they relate to a series of quite fundamental aspects of the ESRC's overall strategy and funding mechanisms. Action on fellowships and higher-risk research would almost certainly need to be determined at the level of the Council rather than a single discipline and similarly any resulting ambition for change would need to align with the UK government's wider science policy priorities.

Figure 9 Which of the Politics Panel’s recommendations have led to specific actions for improvement? (n=6)

Recommendation	Action Taken	No Action Taken
A stronger web presence for better dissemination of research and the assignment of knowledge brokers to major projects and centres	100%	0%
ESRC and others should take a broader view of non-academic impact, embracing social and cultural outcomes as well as policy or economic benefits	83%	17%
Expansion of bursaries to support staff or students to gain access to advanced methods training courses	67%	33%
Implement vigorous strategies to remedy the under-representation of women in senior posts and ethnic minorities at all levels	33%	67%
ESRC and others should seek to support a greater proportion of risky and innovative research that has no immediately foreseeable practical payoffs	17%	83%
Fund research fellowships, across the career cycle, at a level and for a period of time to make them truly useful and attractive to the best people	0%	100%

Technopolis survey, November 2010

If we now turn to Politics, in Figure 9, we find a somewhat different picture to that for Social Anthropology, inasmuch as a majority of the admittedly very small number of respondents believe action had been taken on three of the panel’s six main recommendations. That compared with just one for Social Anthropology.

The bottom two recommendations, with least confidence that action had been taken, were both appeals to the ESRC principally to make quite fundamental changes in its evaluation criteria for proposals submitted to response mode calls and to increase the number, duration and financial intensity of support for research fellowships. The aspiration to see an expansion in the proportion of research that was more imaginative and higher risk, alongside more and better fellowships, echoes the lower rated recommendations made by the Social Anthropology panel, where all respondents stated there had been no action.

The recommendation that was perceived as most successful was the appeal for a stronger web-presence for disseminating research, which was arguably very well aligned with wider policy ambitions within government (DIUS / BIS) and operational investments (in online services, repositories and research information more generally) and coincides with a period of rapid transformation in institutional and project-based communications strategies.

The other recommendation that was widely regarded to have been acted upon was the need to take a broader view of non-academic impacts, embracing social and cultural impacts as well as the more customary view of commercial or policy-related benefits. This recommendation might also be said to reflect the zeitgeist of the ‘noughties,’ and a growing acceptance amongst ministers, research councils and others that publicly-funded research, whether in the physical sciences or the humanities, produces very many different kinds of societal benefit and ought to be judged accordingly. This multiplicity of non-academic benefits was at the heart of the Higher Education Funding Councils’ 2010 pilot exercise to test a practicable impact assessment methodology for implementation in the next (2014) UK-wide assessment of university research (the Research Excellence Framework [REF])

Figure 10 Which of the Economics Panel’s recommendations have led to specific actions for improvement? (n=15)

Recommendation	Action Taken	No Action Taken
Clarify / publicise guidance on the inclusion within proposals of references from final users of research outputs, which are not mandatory	100%	0%
Research funds should be tied to the recruitment of high-quality scholars to help to address weaknesses in the field, and specifically macroeconomics	80%	20%
Enhance Ph.D. training through cooperative networks amongst economics departments, and UK-wide specialised Ph.D. courses in spring or summer	60%	40%
Develop a support system that will provide talented Ph.D. students with financial security during the entire period of their studies	33%	67%

Technopolis survey, November 2010

We turn now to Economics, summarised in Figure 10. The first recommendation, to clarify guidance on the inclusion of references for proposals, appears to have been implemented successfully. The next recommendation with the most confidence that action had been taken is that research funds should be tied to the recruitment of high-quality scholars to address weaknesses in the field, especially in macroeconomics. This recommendation followed from the observation in the Review that as a ‘core’ subject in Economics although there was a relatively decent base-line level in most universities there was an absence of outstanding Macroeconomists in the UK that needed to be addressed. There was a much more polarised opinion as to whether Ph.D. training had been enhanced through cooperative networks between Economics departments, so perhaps these recommendations might have been better publicised or expanded.

Figure 11 Which of the Sociology Panel’s recommendations have led to specific actions for improvement? (n=29)

Recommendation	Action Taken	No Action Taken
Enhance sociology’s academic and public standing by reinforcing its visibility and authority	88%	13%
Define ‘impact measures’ and criteria to maximise the actual societal impacts of sociology	80%	20%
Provide incentives for developing international cooperation, training and comparative research	69%	31%
Bring sociological research methodologies in closer alignment with institutional and international state-of-the-art standards	64%	36%
Strengthen the organisation of the discipline, while preserving its diversity	40%	60%

Technopolis survey, November 2010

Now we move on to Sociology, summarised in Figure 11, which is the most recently completed review, published in March 2010, some eight months before the Technopolis survey was carried out. Despite the much shorter period of elapsed time, as compared with the three earlier reviews, there was noticeably broader agreement here that each of the panel’s main recommendations had been implemented.

It is interesting to note that the top-scoring recommendation, to enhance the academic and public standing of Sociology by reinforcing its visibility and authority is similar to the top-scoring recommendation made by the Social Anthropology panel, to encourage British anthropologists to be a little less modest, or diffident, and to more often take the time to publicly acknowledge or celebrate their discipline’s achievements. There is a resonance with the Politics’ panel’s recommendations about the discipline’s web-presence and a need to increase the visibility, access to and use of its research.

The second most widely regarded recommendation, in terms of action, is the advice to the ESRC to ensure their evolving definition of research impact should include measures and

criteria that encompass the spectrum of academic and societal impacts and thereby allow sociologists (and other social scientists) to demonstrate the full value of the research they carry out. This is similar to the request in the Politics review for the ESRC and others to take a broader view of non-academic impacts, embracing social and cultural impacts. In both cases, our feedback suggests the community would accept that the ESRC and others are actively working to ensure appropriate concepts and measures are being put in place. That said, the issue is probably a matter of concern to all social science research and not one discipline in particular.

The panel was particularly exercised by the adjudged lower-level of internationalism of UK sociology, compared with its counterparts elsewhere and hence made a clear recommendation for the ESRC and for UK sociologists to strive to do more in the international realm. Taken together, the responses suggest this key recommendation has caught people's attention however a significant minority (>30%) believe little if anything new is being done in this area.

The lowest ranked recommendation, to strengthen the organisation of the discipline, picks up on the central theme of the Sociology Review and anxieties regarding the discipline's identity and long-term sustainability are clearly deep-rooted. For this reason, it is likely that this recommendation addresses a rather more complex phenomenon and is arguably much harder to tackle than the more operational-style recommendations about communications or impact assessment criteria.

It is perhaps worth noting that several respondents declined to answer the question about recommendations because of misgivings about the status of such recommendations.

The Review might draw attention to issues but does its remit extend to implementation, as the above appears to suggest? Who would implement these recommendations? At what level? Over what period of time? What happens to these recommendations when the basis for funding HE, in particular non-STEM subjects, is under pressure. How does the Review contribute to a debate at government level and in the public sphere on the legitimacy of Sociology as a discipline and a framework within which to influence public debates? To me, these are the real questions. The role of ESRC in funding research and postgraduate education is of course crucial but with its funding reduced, its ability to ensure a healthy climate to promote a wider-ranging methodological reach is reduced. Students who are numerate will not be tempted by Sociology if it is poorly funded!

Some of the recommendations reflect what is already happening and other recommendations are either misguided or depend on funding that has not been made available. ESRC, so far as I am aware, has done nothing in relation to the review; it has certainly not issued any action plan or commentary on the recommendations. (Or if it has, this has not been made publicly available). Funding cuts following the Comprehensive Spending Review mean that actions are being taken across all disciplines without any regard to the Reviews. This is understandable, but problematic, and funding changes will actually threaten such things as Recommendation 1 above.

We asked an open question, inviting respondents to itemise and comment on any of the Panel's recommendations that had led to specific actions and improvement.

- The Social Anthropologists suggested the review had been of value to the community in some general sense and to individual HEI departments, but that there had been no evident action on the part of the ESRC to follow up on the various recommendations. Indeed, it was suggested that the ESRC had reneged on a verbal undertaking to look at the level of studentships
- The political scientists noted that the community itself was doing rather more to publicise its research outputs and capabilities through a better web presence and that the community was also more comfortable with the idea of telling the public or government about its contributions to the world outside academia. However, one contributor, in noting these developments, went on to express uncertainty as regards the critical role of the IBR report within the wider research policy context

- The economists saw little evidence of implementation or impact, and several people expressed a concern that the ESRC decision to move forward with Doctoral Training Centres (DTCs), rooted in a more general concern, within policy and administrative circles, about the quality and productivity of researcher training, might very well be taking things in the opposite direction to the recommendation made by the panel
- The majority of sociologists stated that it was too early to tell what impact the review would have, although several people went on to comment that any positive effects are quite likely to be overwhelmed by the radically changed economic circumstances for higher education and research, post CSR2010

The preceding questions were designed to establish whether the review participants felt that action had been taken as a result of the recommendations. A subsequent question sought respondents' opinion as to the wider impact of the review on their communities, with people being invited to rate perceived impact anywhere on the spectrum between 'very low' and 'very high.' We summarise their answers to this in Figure 12.

Figure 12 Overall, how do you judge the impact of the Review process on the discipline as a whole? (n=53)

Very low	Low	Medium	High	Very High
4%	25%	47%	21%	4%

Technopolis survey, November 2010

Figure 12 reveals a balanced distribution, with about half the participants seeing the IBR process as having had a 'medium-level' of impact on their respective subject communities, with an even spread of views on either side.

We view this 70:30 split (medium to high impact) as a positive result, and in particular when one considers the scale of the communities in question and the numerous other factors that influence their evolution.

6. The contribution of the Learned Societies

6.1 Introduction

This section of the report presents the results from our interviews and participant survey as regards the appropriateness of the partnership approach that sits at the heart of the IBR model. It goes on to detail the type of contributions made to the process and possible opportunities for developing that generic role for future reviews.

6.2 The partnership approach

The partnership approach is central to the IBR model, and reflects a practical reality on the one hand, as the ESRC is just one source of research funding, and, on the other, its cultural values as regards academic freedoms.

The ESRC is only one source of research funding available to UK social scientists, with many people's research finding support from HEIs and the quality-related research funding that derives from the four higher education funding councils' institutional block grants. Others find support through national charities or even the EU RTD Framework Programme. A significant part of all social science research is quite fundamental in nature, and its collective vitality and direction is at least as much a matter for the community as it is for the council.

There was universal agreement across each of our main groups of interviewees as to the appropriateness of the partnership model, and the improved credibility, engagement and insight that ought to derive from a collaborative format. One panel chair did wonder whether individual learned societies had a sufficient profile to mobilise a majority of members even within their own sub-discipline, and suggested there might be a role for the national academies, whether that was the British Academy (BA) or possibly even the Academy of Social Sciences (AoSS).

Our desk research similarly confirms that this is general practice: the partnership approach is followed by the EPSRC – even more determinedly – and by all but one of the overseas reviews we looked at, including Finland, Sweden and the US.

The free text responses to our survey were also generally supportive of the governance arrangements in general and the partnership approach in particular, although in a small minority of cases, people did counsel caution over the level of involvement of the learned societies and the associated risks of biasing the work of panels and diminishing the appearance of independence on the part of panels.

The concerns ranged from anxieties about the representativeness of learned societies in a given domain through to allegations of ideological and dogmatic positions. There was no suggestion that learned societies had determined the outcomes of reviews directly, however a minority did express doubts about the composition of panels and the resulting balance of their work (sub-fields), which it was argued must unavoidably shape and colour their report. In just three cases, people argued that future reviews should be overseen by a specially constituted task group (open and transparent) and that the learned societies should contribute to the review on the same terms as all other stakeholders.

We found only one instance where an individual argued that a substantial component of the final report focused – very positively – on an area of social science that is really very niche, whilst arguably overlooking other more mainstream areas.

These are classic anxieties with any peer review, and the great majority of people interviewed or responding to our questionnaires took the view that getting the right people – and mix of people – was critical to the entire undertaking. However, there was also a clear consensus that the sorts of people that were appointed to panels are exactly the kinds of individuals that can render good safe judgements based on somewhat messy and partial data.

6.3 The role of the learned societies in the review process

This set of questions explored the role of the learned societies in the Review process and the extent to which they made a critical contribution to it.

Figure 13 presents the results, and confirms the majority of respondents believe the learned societies played a significant and positive role within the review process overall. The exception to this very positive feedback is the implementation of the review findings, where a significant minority of respondents stated that the learned societies had not made a significant contribution in following up recommendations.

Figure 13 To what extent did the learned societies play a critical role in the Review? (n=68)

Area	1 or 2 (low)	3 (medium)	4 or 5 (high)
The population / constitution of the Panel	4%	19%	78%
Inputs to the Review Partnership overall	5%	19%	75%
The governance / oversight of the process / findings	8%	27%	65%
The evidence base provided to the Review Panel	11%	25%	64%
The dissemination of Review findings	20%	18%	62%
The engagement of the academic community	10%	29%	60%
The implementation of Review findings	42%	12%	45%

Technopolis survey, November 2010

The learned societies were widely regarded as having made a key contribution to the constitution of their respective International Panel and their support for the creation of a strong review partnership more generally (ESRC, learned societies, lead users, etc).

The learned societies were similarly reported to have made important contributions to most other aspects of the review, specifically, governance of the process overall, the provision of supplementary evidence and the dissemination of the report and its findings. In relative terms, the aggregate results suggest the learned societies did less well in engaging the academic communities, their membership, in the review process.

Our interviews with the ESRC officers and chairs of the review steering committees confirmed the fundamental role that had been played by the learned societies in the identification of prospective chairpersons and indeed candidates for membership of the panels more generally. The contribution involved rather more than sharing of personal contacts with the ESRC and crucially, societies provided a more informed view as regards the relevant experience and suitability of nominees. In return, the panel chairs confirmed the importance of these brokered invitations. Beyond this, the panel chair played an important role in expanding the list of possible panel members and added his or her reputational weight to the credibility of the ESRC and the learned societies in question. Overall, the learned societies played a central role in the constitution of the panel, the quality and composition of which is almost universally seen to be critical to the credibility of each review.

Intriguingly, our interviews and open-question responses found that the members of the international panels (not the chair person) judged themselves to have only a limited view of the contributions of the learned societies to the review process overall. This supports the notion that the learned societies made their most important contributions at the outset, in helping to identify panel chairs and draw up shortlists of candidates whom they did not know well personally. It also suggests the learned societies did not seek to actively influence panel members, although they did provide evidentiary inputs in most cases and debated the panel findings in the closing stages of the review. As one chair put it, the calibre and international standing of the panel members really meant any thought of trying to sway or influence the findings was a non-starter.

As noted already, the Achilles heel would appear to be the learned societies' support for and enactment of relevant findings. Dissemination and implementation are the two aspects of the IBR process where a notable proportion of respondents reported the learned societies as having arguably done too little.

This result is consistent with the feedback from our stakeholder interviews in general and in particular of discussions with the chairs of the review steering committees, all of who were former presidents of their respective societies. There was widespread agreement that the review findings and recommendations were not quite as well disseminated as they might be and that there was a poorly developed process for ensuring a formal response to a review or a dedicated action plan to implement the key recommendations. However, there were mixed feelings as to whether the learned societies could do very much more, given the quite fundamental nature of the challenges raised by panels and the organisations' own limitations (resources and authority). This relative concern and uncertainty should not be seen as an indication that the learned societies were not active supporters of the reviews. In almost all cases, the reviews had been linked with national conferences and other ad hoc events and for the earlier exercises the review findings continue to provide a thread for break-out sessions at successive annual events to explore progress on important generic issues from doctoral training to gender equality. The economics review was timed to coincide with the annual conference of the Royal Economic Society, held at Warwick University, and the visiting panel took the opportunity to run sessions, mingle with delegates more generally and keep to a very busy programme of meetings and poster sessions.

The ESRC officers reported varying degrees of engagement by the learned societies, which perhaps reflect certain structural factors (the absolute size of a learned society and its pre-eminence within the discipline): the Royal Economic Society (RES) is a very large, elite institution, which threw very substantial resources at the Review, whereas, by contrast, the Association of Social Anthropologists (ASA) is a much smaller society with very limited resources. The chairs of the steering committees acknowledged this challenge and contend that there will always be issues where the principal societies are smaller, community-based operations; they will inevitably face practical problems of finding the time and resource to take up the recommendations posed and to use these for galvanising activity on the ground.

There were also differences evident as regards organisational values, with some learned societies taking a harder line with the ESRC as regards their responsibilities for disseminating and implementing the findings. The British Sociological Association (BSA) for example was reported to have provided wide-ranging support to the Review, but had been less excited by the need to discuss the recommendations within its own committees on the assumption that the advice of the Review Panel was for the ESRC alone and not the council and the community.

6.4 Involvement of the Learned Societies in future reviews

We concluded the questions regarding the role of the Learned Societies with an open question, inviting respondents to imagine what more one might ask of the learned societies, in future Reviews, and to what end.

Around 40 people replied and said more than no comment, however of this number 16 stated that they had no view of the expectations for the learned societies nor what contributions they had made. This rather bluff reply suggests that many contributors, possibly a majority, given the fact that around 30 respondents chose not to answer the tick-box question and more than 60 omitted the open question, will have no view as to the role of the learned societies. Perhaps more surprising, five of the six panellists that replied stated that they were unaware of the contributions of the learned societies to their particular review. It is not clear whether this level of community-awareness is in some way problematic for the reviews, however the degree of uncertainty about roles and responsibilities has a resonance with previously cited concerns about procedural transparency more generally.

The remainder had rather mixed views:

- Four people thought the Learned Societies ought to be more centrally involved in the definition, coordination and execution of the individual reviews
- Others (8 people) endorsed the existing arrangements, underling the importance of the learned societies to the exercise overall, arguing the ESRC had things about right
- Another group suggested that in future reviews the learned societies should be required to do rather more to animate and engage their respective communities and to prepare relevant statistics and evidence that covered the entire discipline in the UK (in recognition

of the fact that the ESRC is not the only source of funds, and that there will be individual scholars or small research groups doing important work out of the line of sight of the ESRC and the country's bigger university departments)

- Several people argued that the learned societies might play a less prominent role in future, principally advising on the scoping of the exercise and the engagement of the community. Three people expressed concern about the rivalry amongst the learned societies in their field, and two went as far as to say Learned Societies ought not to chair the steering committee
- Two people suggested the Learned Societies might take the IBR approach to its logical conclusion and come together to institute a permanent report on the size and health of their respected discipline, with an annual update of key statistics (annual income, researchers, research students, citations, etc) along with a commentary and possibly case studies of noteworthy occurrences

This is one aspect of our work where the feedback did have a different feel across the five disciplines. In both Social Anthropology and Psychology the great majority of people had a positive view of the contribution of the learned societies and saw no strong need for major change; the psychologists did see an opportunity for more active animation of the community.

Meanwhile, none of the contributors to the economics review felt the need to offer any comments on this point (although it's fair to say that the economists provided the least number of responses, in proportionate terms, to any open question).

The sociologists were exercised by the rather low-level of engagement of the research community overall, and while acknowledging the shadow effect of the RAE2008, run in the year prior to the review, several people stated that, in their opinion, the learned societies ought to have done much more to ensure the key institutions were involved. The political scientists were perhaps the most negative, on balance, arguing that long-standing inter-institutional rivalry had possibly lead to lower levels of engagement across the community.

7. The IBR series in comparison with other similar reviews

7.1 Introduction

Internationally, research-funding agencies have been increasing their evaluation activities at various levels of aggregation beyond the monitoring and evaluation of individual research grants, but in particular at a policy level (e.g. reviews of the effectiveness of strategies on gender equality, open access or public engagement) and a scheme or programme level.⁷

As with the ESRC, several other research councils also conduct systematic reviews of research fields with a view to benchmarking the state of the art of the discipline, nationally, against the best in the world, internationally.

In order to check the extent to which ESRC procedure is in line with good practice elsewhere, and to search out any interesting strengths and weaknesses of these other agencies' approaches, we have looked a little more closely at the arrangements in:

- Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (UK)
- Academy of Finland
- Research Council of Norway
- Swedish Research Council
- National Academy of Sciences (USA)

Figure 14, Figure 15 and Figure 16 present a sequence of tables to compare the field-level reviews in operation at these five research councils with the arrangements at the ESRC. There is a great deal of information, so we have split the tables to aid legibility.

7.2 Objectives of international reviews of scientific disciplines

There is a good degree of consistency across the research-funding agencies in respect to the overarching ambitions for this sort of evaluation of a research field, which align reasonably well with the ESRC ambitions. The central aims revolve around assessing institutional performance in the field nationally, rating that performance on an internationally-normalised scale and identifying measures to improve performance, more specifically:

- To determine the quality of research in a given discipline nationally, at a given point in time, in comparison with the international norm
- To identify the strengths and weaknesses of the sub-disciplines across the field, as well as the reasons for them
- To identify where and how to support a research field in order to facilitate an improvement in its international standing overall

The US National Academy of Sciences employs a rather more competitive brief, which comprises an international benchmark, and explanation of US performance relative to the rest of the world and a projection of the US position relative to others, in the near term and the long term.

The Scandinavian research councils appear to make pretty wide-ranging use of field reviews, commissioning two or even three evaluations a year and following a broadly similar model with an international panel being used to judge the field and the institutions.

⁷ A useful overview of these developments is presented in a recent ESF paper from 2009, Evaluation in National Research Funding Agencies: approaches, experiences and case studies. A report of the ESF Member Organisation Forum on Ex-Post Evaluation of Funding Schemes and Research Programmes.

Figure 14 Comparison of the ESRC IBR approach with other selected international reviews: terms of reference

Organisation	Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)	Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC)	Academy of Finland	Research Council of Norway	Swedish Research Council	US National Academy of Sciences
Review Title	International Benchmarking Review of UK Sociology	2009 International Review of UK Chemistry Research	Mechanical Engineering Research in Finland, 2000–2007. An International Evaluation.	Basic Chemistry Research in Norway	Evaluation of clinical research in Sweden and Finland	The Future of U.S. Chemistry: Benchmarks and Challenges (2007)
Terms of reference	<p>Quality of UK sociology from an international perspective</p> <p>Institutional and HR issues key to future success</p> <p>Future of UK sociology</p> <p>Newly emerging fields of research</p> <p>The ESRC sets the broad direction, while the Steering Group and Chair of the Panel determine the specific questions, as appropriate to the discipline under review</p>	<p>Assess quality of UK research against international benchmark</p> <p>Assess scientific impact</p> <p>Highlight any gaps or missed opportunities</p> <p>Eight topline questions, from international standing to creativity and economic alignment, but with 30+ subsidiary questions</p>	<p>To evaluate mechanical engineering research in Finland from three different levels: the field as a whole, the different sub-fields and at the unit level</p> <p>To present a critical assessment of the quality and relevance of mechanical engineering research in Finland</p> <p>To compare the quality, innovativeness and efficiency of the research with international standards</p> <p>To provide recommendations for the future development of the field</p>	<p>A critical review of the strengths and weaknesses of chemistry research in Norway</p> <p>Evaluation of the scientific quality of the basic research in chemistry</p> <p>Identification of the research groups that have achieved high international level in their research or have the potential to reach such a level</p> <p>Identification of areas of research that should be strengthened in order to ensure that Norway will possess the necessary competences in areas of importance to the nation in the future</p>	<p>Evaluation of the overall quality of clinical research in Finland and Sweden</p> <p>Recognition of strong and weak research areas</p> <p>Evaluation of the differences between disciplines</p> <p>Comparison of the differences in clinical research in Finland and Sweden</p> <p>Assessment of the adequacy and allocation processes of funding</p> <p>Recognition of the platforms where basic and epidemiological research are efficiently linked to clinical research</p> <p>Assessment of future prospects of clinical research in Finland and Sweden</p> <p>Assessment of the career development of young</p>	<p>What is the position of U.S. research in chemical engineering relative to that in other regions or countries?</p> <p>What are the key factors influencing relative U.S. performance in chemical engineering (i.e., human resources, equipment, infrastructure, etc.)?</p> <p>On the basis of current trends in the United States and worldwide, extrapolate to the U.S. relative position in the near and longer-term future.</p>

					physician scientists	
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Figure 15 Comparison of the IBR approach with other selected international reviews: methodology

Organisation	Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)	Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC)	Academy of Finland	Research Council of Norway	Swedish Research Council	US National Academy of Sciences
Approaches / methods	Peer review involving a panel of 9 academics from around the world	Peer review involving an international panel of 18 academics and industrialists, which split into two sub-panels to expand the number of institutions it was able to visit	Peer review involving an international panel of 7 academics	Peer review involving an international panel of 7 people with an eighth international expert contracted to work as the secretary to the panel	Peer review involving an international panel of 15 scientific experts, which split into three sub-panels	Peer review involving a panel of 12 comprising 9 US and 3 international experts, covering nine sub-fields and with a balance of experts from academic, business and national labs
-	Panel visits / hearings	Panel visits / hearings	Panel visits / hearings	Panel visits / hearings	Panel visits / hearings	No visits
-	Self-assessment questionnaire, submitted by any university department in scope	Self-assessment questionnaire, submitted by any university department in scope	Self-assessment questionnaire, submitted by any university department in scope	Preparation of self-assessment using template, by all universities in scope	Preparation of self-assessment using template, by all universities in scope	No departmental submissions
-	Demographic and statistical analyses	Demographics / statistics from EPSRC	Demographic and statistical analyses	Demographic and statistical analyses	Demographic and statistical analyses	Demographic and statistical analyses
-	Bibliometric analysis of field outputs / citations, cf international	Results of the RAE2008 for chemistry UOA	Bibliometric analysis of field outputs / citations, cf international	Bibliometric analysis of field outputs / citations, cf international	Bibliometric analysis of field outputs / citations, cf international	Bibliometric analysis of field outputs / citations, cf international
-	Thematic Reviews commissioned from national experts	-	-	-	-	Patent analyses
-	-	-	-	-	-	Prizes and appointments
-	-	-	-	-	-	International co-nomination exercise to identify the best of the best globally in 9

						subject areas, as basis for mapping US presence in a 'virtual world congress'
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Figure 16 Comparison of the IBR approach with other selected international reviews: arrangements

Organisation	Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)	Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC)	Academy of Finland	Research Council of Norway	Swedish Research Council	US National Academy of Sciences
Review Title	International Benchmarking Review of UK Sociology	2009 International Review of UK Chemistry Research	Mechanical Engineering Research in Finland, 2000–2007. An International Evaluation.	Basic Chemistry Research in Norway	Evaluation of clinical research in Sweden and Finland	The Future of U.S. Chemistry: Benchmarks and Challenges (2007)
Strategic context	Part of an ongoing series of Reviews intended to complement the national research assessment exercise with a more robust international benchmark and more formative assessment of strengths weaknesses and future challenges and opportunities.	Part of an ongoing series of Reviews, which is second time through (first round launched in 1999) It is intended to complement the national research assessment exercise with a more robust international benchmark and more formative assessment of strengths weaknesses and future challenges and opportunities. Might not move on to a third series, as RC investing more through strategic programmes Might selectively target disciplines in difficulty	International reviews of key research fields are seen as one important strand of the Council's evaluation activities	International reviews of key research fields are one important strand of the Council's evaluation activities, with all disciplines subject to such a review every 10 years or so.	International reviews of key research fields are seen as one important strand of the Council's evaluation activities	Ad hoc. At the request of the National Science Foundation Engineering Directorate, the National Academies will perform an international benchmarking exercise to determine the standing of the U.S. research enterprise relative to its international peers in the fields of chemical engineering
Scope	All aspects of the discipline within the HE sector, no matter the source of funding	All UK chemistry research (universities) funded by RCs, FCs, charities and industry	All aspects of the discipline, whomever is funding	All aspects of the discipline, whomever is funding	All clinical research carried out within the medical faculties of national universities and university hospitals	All aspects of chemicals research, including private sector notionally although main focus on public research in practice

Organisation	Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)	Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC)	Academy of Finland	Research Council of Norway	Swedish Research Council	US National Academy of Sciences
Periodicity	ESRC is working through its core disciplines, at the rate of one major review each year. There is no commitment to re-run reviews	Ad hoc (5-10 years), previous chemistry review in 2002	Ad hoc	10-year cycle, previous chemistry review in 1997	Ad hoc	Ad hoc, prompted by national competitiveness review and declining federal support for physical sciences
Est. average cost (cash)	£150K	c. £200K	c. £250K	c. £200K	c. £170K	£100K
Duration of the Review	2009, 18 months	2009, 18 months	2007/08, 9 months	2008, 7 months	2008/09, 15 months	2007, 6 months
Governance	Steering group comprising ESRC, learned societies, research users and representatives of several other stakeholder groups.	The review was overseen by a Steering Committee comprising representatives from all key UK stakeholder groups (e.g. MRC) and chaired by a former president of the Royal Society of Chemistry	A Steering Group was appointed by the Academy's Research Council for Natural Sciences and Engineering to oversee the process. An international evaluation panel, appointed by the President of the Academy write the report. The panel is helped by the coordinator and by the responsible officials within the Academy.	The international panel was constituted and launched by the Division of Science of the RCN specifically, without any obvious intermediate oversight, to guide its funding and support and to provide individual groups with the insight to do some self-help.	A Steering Group chaired by a medical professor from Turku University, representing the Research Council for Health of the Academy of Finland and the Special Inquiry Commission of Clinical Research in Sweden in collaboration with the Swedish Research Council	The National Academy followed the NSF's standard procedures, with an independent review panel (non-specialists) and a subject-specific review board
Partnership	Partnership between ESRC and learned societies	Partnership between EPSRC other interested research councils (e.g. BBSRC, MRC, NERC, STFC) and learned societies	Just the Academy	Just RCN	Partnership. This is a cross-border and cross-council review, which brought together the Academy of Finland with the Swedish Research Council	Partnership between National Academy and National Science Foundation

Organisation	Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)	Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC)	Academy of Finland	Research Council of Norway	Swedish Research Council	US National Academy of Sciences
Engagement of the community	Open invitation to 98 university departments to make a submission (23 did so) and possibly attend a hearing (heads of departments with panel), with exercise promoted by major learned societies	(i) Steering Committee nominate departments, EPSRC invite contributions but its voluntary; (ii) each visit involves a public dialogue event; (iii) review concludes with town meeting; and action plan drawn up in consultation with community	The Academy asked all units with a Mech. Eng. research capability to prepare a self-assessment submission, as their input to the evaluation (31 of 31)	The RCN invited all universities with an active interest in chemistry research to make a submission to the process in order to be eligible for future funding, and all did so	The SRC invited university departments and hospitals to participate directly, through submissions and hosting visits	No direct involvement of individual research institutions, beyond key members of the panel. No visits or institution-level submissions, with assessment mostly based on stats and bibliometrics.
Reporting	50-page report, with 1-page response by steering group The report was used as the platform for a workshop with the community. The ESRC issued any formal reply and action plan, agreed with the learned societies, and published in Sep 2011	300-page draft report was presented to the UK academic community through a Town Meeting	260-page report, with institutional reviews, bibliometrics and area statistics The report is published by the Academy.	260 page report, including letters, templates, demographics, bibliometrics	80-page report, including bibliometric analyses	160-page report
Use of the results	Informed negotiations with research ministry; informed reviews of researcher training and proposals for tackling identified weaknesses	EPSRC publishes an action plan in response to each review, in this case an item-by-item account announced in spring 2010 - with a 2-yr plan - following 6-9 months of dialogue and consultation		The field level reviews have led to reorganisation of research institutions and the creation of new funding schemes, for centres of excellence		Unknown

7.2.1 Review questions

The desk research and resulting tables show that the review questions are very similar across the different administrations, and that they encompass an assessment of both the current situation and likely future development. In all cases, the reviews are required to:

- Benchmark of national research quality against the best internationally
- Identify particular strengths and weaknesses nationally
- Reflect on future opportunities and challenges for the discipline nationally

In most cases, there is an expectation that panels will also consider the health of the discipline in some general sense and any early warning of possible future problems therein. Similarly, the Scandinavian research councils ask panels to consider non-academic impacts. The Research Council of Norway also invites panels to consider the appropriateness of the national funding arrangements and wider policy context.

The US review is somewhat narrower, really focusing on the benchmark and an explanation as to why the country is strong or weak in each sub-field. The panel is also invited to project forward from this assessment, using simple foresight and forecasting techniques to estimate trajectories and end-points 10 years hence.

7.2.2 Approach and methods

Peer review sits at the heart of the process, in all cases, and with the exception of the US, each panel is provided with comprehensive, statistical overviews, bibliometrics analyses and institutional self-evaluation reports, as well as interacting directly with the research community. The size and composition of the panels was also very similar, again with the exception of the US. In all cases, the evaluations typically run over a 12-month period, with the visits taking place in the latter stages of the review. Indeed, the degree of similarity as regards the combination of methods and data inputs is striking.

The US panel is the principal exception. It did not interact with research groups and did not solicit self-assessments. This is partly pragmatic, acknowledging the sheer scale of the national research base, but there is also an explicit preference to use objective data wherever possible. The panel used extensive quantitative indicators and area reports, prepared by national domain experts, to arrive at its principal conclusions, in a single meeting together. The Swedish Research Council made similarly extensive use of bibliometrics, commissioning significantly more comprehensive analyses than the ESRC, however we understand the Swedish work had a substantially larger budget.

The US panel involved a mixture of national and international experts, whereas all of the other scientific administrations used only international experts. It also included a broad mix of academics, government scientists and industrialists, where other administrations used only academics.

There are other points of difference. In the UK, the EPSRC panels still tend to tour the country, spending at least one half day with every research group. The EPSRC and its partner councils pick the top 20 UK departments – using internal data on grant awards and the RAE – and then invited the 20 to host a half-day visit with the panel. The panel visit – one week – begins with a briefing session before splitting in to two touring sides, north and south, with occasional telephone conferences to keep things moving along and a final joint session at the end of the week, before the chair is then left to write up the report. The two touring panels manage to see two institutions every day of the five days, with the following generic agenda:

- En route discuss any issues they want to look at specifically

- Plenary presentation by HOD or head of faculty, providing an introduction to the groups, their most notable achievements and current programmes of work. The instruction is to provide a view that is additional to the view submitted to the RAE (the chairs quickly tell them to move on when they bogged down with repetition of RAE submissions)
- React to presentations for the most part, although some issues are revealed through EPSRC-furnished evidence
- A series of more focused discussions with individual research groups
- A poster sessions with doctoral students and post-docs over lunch (usually managed to encompass 20+ posters with every member of the panel getting to speak with 2 or 3 people)
- Plenary to wrap things up with the department
- A short closed session to discuss issues arising, and individual assessments then written up overnight

In Scandinavia and Germany, the involvement of institutions is effectively mandatory. Here, the panels rate the performance (1 to 5) of institutions also, however these scores do not drive future funding in a direct fashion due to the ad hoc and selected nature of the review series (the work might encompass 10% of total research funding in any one year).

The German Council of Science and Humanities has been piloting the assessment of research fields and has published several English-language summaries, one of which rates all institutions in the fields of chemistry and sociology (2008). The process is referred to as 'informed peer review,' wherein a panel of experts (predominantly national but not exclusively) rates the performance of each institution on nine criteria (research quality, scientific impact, knowledge transfer and public engagement, etc) with the quality and impact criteria rated on a scale of 1 to 5 where 5 is internationally outstanding. The peer review is informed by self-assessment reports, financial statistics, various esteem indicators and bibliometrics and patents, where appropriate.

The German and Scandinavian approaches are more intensive than we see in the ESRC, however, it is important to bear in mind two important contextual factors:

- In Scandinavia, the national research systems are small enough for a single research council to cover most if not all disciplines. It is typical to commission an International Review of the social sciences every two or three years, (RCN and economic research in 2007, linguistics in 2005, pedagogy in 2004 and political science in 2002)
- None of these countries has had a national performance-based research assessment system covering all fields, comparable to the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) here in the UK, which makes the field reviews more important in the overall research system

The only novel methodology we encountered was the US panel's virtual world congress, which worked like a co-nomination exercise. The panel was invited to nominate 10 scientific leaders as a basis for the panel secretariat inviting each of those individuals to nominate 10 non-national leaders in their respective sub-field and then invite the 100 to nominate the top 20 in their field globally before consolidating a single list and inviting the 1,000+ to rate the US sub-fields on a standard scale (leader / follower / laggard). The question can be asked a second time, revealing the distributions in a way one might with a Delphi exercise, in order to push for greater consensus. Importantly, the 'congress' was used alongside several other techniques, such as the share of US-addresses in the top 5% of authors in key chemicals journals, in order to seek out convergence and gain greater confidence when faced with what are imperfect techniques / indicators.

7.2.3 Reporting

The published reports range in length from 50 to 250 pages and include key documentary evidence as well as findings and procedural descriptions. In Scandinavia, the Panel reports are followed by a formal reply (published) from the relevant research funding agency or agencies, setting out its acceptance of the review findings (or otherwise) and itemising improvement actions. It is typical for the research council and panel to present to a meeting of the community, explaining the findings and discussing any appropriate responses. In the UK, the EPSRC also prepares a formal response to the advice of the panels and publishes this alongside the panel report, both of which are presented at a Town Hall meeting with the research community, where the findings and recommendations are deliberated and prioritised. Subsequent to this it is typical for the EPSRC programme director and evaluation team to prepare an action plan, setting out specific objectives and metrics for the council and or the community to work with. In the US, Panel reports provide answers to the questions posed but do not provide public recommendations. There is no formal monitoring of progress.

7.3 Feedback from surveys and interviews

In addition to our desk research, we elected to ask participants how well acquainted they were with discipline-level reviews conducted by other scientific administrations here in the UK or further afield, and for those that had relevant knowledge, how well they rated the IBR series by comparison. The great majority of people that answered this question, more than 70%, stated that they were unaware of any similar discipline-level, international benchmarking exercises, which suggests the IBR approach is not particularly commonplace. Those people that stated they were familiar with comparable international reviews were invited to rate the ESRC approach, on each of its principal features, as with Figure 3 above, in terms of its alignment with best practice.

Figure 17 How does the IBR series compare with similar reviews conducted elsewhere? (n=16)

Area	1 or 2	3	4 or 5
The governance arrangements	0%	0%	100%
The role, competence or composition of the Panel	0%	0%	100%
Organisation e.g. Timetable, administrative support	0%	0%	100%
The scope of the Review and its core questions	0%	6%	94%
The dissemination and implementation of Review findings	21%	0%	79%
The evidence base provided to the Review Panel	0%	31%	69%

Technopolis survey, November 2010

Figure 17 shows the results, which confirm the very great majority of what is admittedly a small number of respondents believe the IBR approach compares extremely well with other reviews and 'best practice.' There was universal agreement amongst the 16 respondents that the IBR arrangements are best practice in respect to its governance, the international panel and the organisation of the review. In addition, there was almost universal agreement that the scope of the reviews, and the core questions, was in line with international practice more generally. The reviews were marginally less widely regarded (11 of 16 strongly approved) in respect to their provision of evidence and the implementation of the review findings.

The dissemination and implementation of the Review findings is the one dimension where a proportion of respondents (3) rated the IBR model as being less good than the

approach adopted by other agencies. In addition to asking respondents to rate the robustness of the IBR approach as compared with the arrangements followed by any broadly analogous review process, the questionnaire invited people to name any similar benchmarking programme(s) – in the UK or further afield – they believe the ESRC might possibly be able to learn from. There were just four or five responses to this invitation, and in all but one case people simply named an agency or country. While we asked people to be specific about potential improvements, in a subsequent question, none of the contributors chose to detail the aspects of these alternative reviews that were potential improvements upon the IBR process. We followed up these nominations with an online search of the relevant agency's evaluation policies and guidelines, the following bullets offer an elaborated version of the recommendations, below in no particular order:

- The Evaluation and Knowledge Development Unit (RCH/EVA), within the Agence Française de Développement (AFD), which is a national body involved in the international development arena, running aid projects and funding academic research in the field⁸
- The Australian Research Council's (ARC) Excellence in Research for Australia is a national assessment (run in 2010/11) covering all fields of research in all institutions, which combines discipline-specific peer review panels with discipline-specific variants of standard metrics, to judge quality and impact. This exercise is a major national undertaking equivalent to the UK's research assessment exercise, which will help to determine future institutional income. The Council for the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences has published a paper explaining the differences in the detailed assessment arrangements that will apply to the SSH research fields as compared with the STEM subjects.⁹ The principal difference however relates to the use of citation analyses, where these will be in general use for the STEM disciplines, they will apply only to psychology with the SSH domain and instead those disciplines will nominate their best research outputs for peer review (reading)
- Several people stated that the Research Excellence Framework was perhaps the single best example as regards a systematic assessment process that operates at the discipline level, although its panellists are predominantly UK-residents with only a minority of non-doms from the wider international community
- The Public Accounting Report annual survey of accounting professors was nominated as a possible point of reference,¹⁰ wherein a national professional association polls the entire community of senior academics working in the accounting field (1,900 professors at 361 colleges and universities, in 2009) in order to generate ranked lists for the most widely regarded (top 25) undergraduate programmes, postgraduate programmes, doctoral (research) programmes and accounting practices. It was suggested that this type of annual survey might be replicated here in the UK, with professors of economics

Perhaps through a lack of familiarity, no one nominated scientific administrations working in fields outside the social sciences, such as the EPSRC, which has been conducting international benchmarks of its core disciplines for more than 10 years. Moreover, no one nominated the national research councils in Denmark, Finland, Norway or Sweden, where international reviews are the norm and periodical discipline-level reviews are a long-standing feature of the Nordic research system,

⁸ See www.afd.fr for further information, although there is no English-language description of the agency's evaluation methodology.

⁹ www.chass.org.au/articles/ART20100215HH.php

¹⁰ The most recent report (of the 2009 survey results) is at www.marshall.usc.edu/assets/128/21997.pdf

although they tend to be mandatory in all but and do drive institutional funding to a certain degree. These reviews have been used as an alternative to national research assessment exercises, analogous to the UK's RAE, however Denmark has now introduced a national performance-based review and one might expect to see a reduction in the number of discrete, discipline level reviews in future.

8. Value for money of the IBR series

8.1 Introduction

In this section, we discuss our assessment of value for money in terms of the ESRC's investment in the international benchmarking series, which draws on our desk research, and in particular the international comparison, and our interviews and surveys.

8.2 Desk research and interviews

Our desk research suggests the individual reviews are competitively priced at around £150K in cash costs (to the ESRC) in comparison with the discipline-level reviews being carried out elsewhere in the UK, Scandinavia and the US.

Our interviews with panel chairs and steering groups revealed almost universal agreement that the reviews are good value, inasmuch as they are largely additional and of considerable interest to the discipline and to the ESRC, and with a cash price equivalent to a single small research grant. Only one person was in disagreement, arguing that the budget would be better spent on studentships.

Notwithstanding this view, there was widespread unease around the outcomes of the process, and specifically the absence of any public feedback from the ESRC as regards the changes that had been made as a result of the advice they were being given. The learned societies were openly debating the findings at their respective annual conferences, however most were thought to have limited practicable influence on the ground. Moreover, there was a concern expressed by several contributors, that one of the most important audiences, university vice chancellors, was being overlooked.

Our interviews with the ESRC suggest reasonable VFM, but possibly reducing over time as the procedure has been refined and developed. The Reviews have become somewhat more involved and costly over time, and yet the conclusions still tend to be somewhat unsurprising. Notwithstanding this quality, the reviews were reported to have provided invaluable reference material / evidence to support the senior management team in its ongoing discussions with the team at the Office of Science and Innovation and were believed to have contributed towards a more positive settlement for science within the 2010 comprehensive spending review.

8.3 The survey response

This sub-section presents our analysis of survey findings, which confirm the view that an international review, at £150K, is pretty good value, although a significant minority of respondents declined to give a view in the absence of any good insight as regards what had changed on the ground as a result of the review. Unfortunately, the rather uneven nature of replies means we were unable to determine any meaningful differences across reviews.

Figure 181818 shows the distribution of responses rating the value-for-money of the reviews, given the typical cash cost of each review is around £150K. The median response was that the Reviews offered 'high' value for money, with a wide dispersion among the answers, and the next most popular category that the Reviews offered a 'medium' level of value for money.

This is a strongly positive result on what for many people will be the acid test, with more than 85% of respondents judging the reviews' value for money as being medium to high.

Figure 18 The value for money offered by the Review process? (n=61)

Very low	Low	Medium	High	Very High
3%	13%	30%	38%	16%

Technopolis survey, November 2010

We went on to invite contributors to describe any practicable changes they would recommend to the ESRC, which they believed might improve the efficiency of the Review process without compromising its robustness.

Around 40 people took time to provide further comments, with the great majority electing to underline earlier remarks about the strengths or weaknesses of the IBR approach rather than offering any advice on possible efficiencies. Several people did observe that their involvement with a given review had been rather narrow and as such they had no good basis for suggesting possible future economies. In practice, only a small minority offered suggestions for reducing costs, by reducing the size of the international panel and reducing the travel involved in the itinerary. These particular suggestions related to the earlier reviews and echo changes already made to the process. Participants in more recent reviews suggested there might be cost economies for the community – rather than the cash costs to the ESRC – in seeking out a closer alignment between the IBR evidentiary requirements and the kinds of tests (and evidence) required by the RAE / REF process.

More generally, people offered advice on how to derive greater benefit from the reviews, improving value for money by increasing outputs rather than reducing inputs:

- Several people commented on the nature of the evidence base, and suggested there may be a case to implement community-wide consultations and online surveys to more efficiently collect relevant and representative opinions
- Elsewhere people suggested the ESRC should look to improve the structure and discipline of the hearings, to reduce time lost to tangential discussions. Look to improve the process of deliberation within the panel at the close of their visit, in order to arrive at a more systematic appraisal of all evidence and the preparation of a summary that comprises a sharper but balanced critique
- The majority of comments related to the dissemination of findings and the implementation of the advice contained within the panel reports. Many suggested more could be done to publicise the review findings within a beyond the particular discipline, and amongst key non-academic groups, through the publication of report summaries or the organisation of discussion events. There were suggestions regarding the basic contract between the ESRC and the review panel and the possibility of adding to the IBR rules of the game a commitment to respond formally to the advice given. In one case, the respondent suggested the ESRC should publish its response to the advice and identify those areas where it would act, and where the resulting action-plan should be associated with concrete improvement targets and a timeline. Others suggested any action plans must be resourced appropriately and accompanied by a structured process of progress tracking and reporting

We brought the survey to a close with an open question asking people to provide a final comment on the International Benchmarking Review approach and in particular its future development.

Around 50 people provided feedback, with great majority simply observing that from their perspective the review had been a worthwhile exercise, offering an essentially unique perspective and, when considered in the round, not entailing excessive costs. A minority argued that the process had to be seen as being compromised in the current difficult financial environment, given the apparently limited use made of panel advice.

Only a minority commented directly on the future of the IBR series. Just three people explicitly stated that they believed the series should continue and that periodical

disciplinary reviews should be a permanent feature. Two of those individuals suggested the periodicity should be every 6-7 years and possibly a little longer. A fourth contributor suggested the international review series should be continued, but ought to be placed on a more formal footing with a commitment to look at all disciplines and not just the big areas and for this to be done routinely. Lastly, two respondents stated that the IBR process – while of self-evident value to the disciplines involved – did not amount to a priority in the current financial situation, and should not be continued.

9. Overall success, lessons learned and future reviews

9.1 Overall success

The current exercise has confirmed that the IBR process is well-regarded by the very great majority of people that provided feedback. Its focus on disciplines is essentially unique, and adds real value to the other evaluation models in operations, whether that is ESRC thematic or programmatic evaluations or the national research assessment exercise. The international perspective is also very distinctive, and well-regarded.

The methodology – an informed peer review – is considered to be entirely appropriate and robust. The ESRC received many plaudits from panel chairs and panellists for its overall approach and its conduct more generally. The ESRC approach to international peer review is believed to be best-in-class by a majority of those that have been closely involved with the IBR and other broadly analogous international exercises. The international comparison confirms the appropriateness of the IBR approach, showing the ESRC model aligns well with practice in other leading scientific nations.

The review outcomes – downstream success – are less visible to the community than is the genuine approval of the contributors.

The learned societies are unequivocal, arguing that the reviews have provided a valuable animation of disciplines and ‘held up a mirror’ to the disciplines themselves, which has been challenging in several instances. The politics review is perhaps the one area where UK contributors were less persuaded of its value, however that relates in large part to the very different judgement rendered by the RAE some two years after the politics report was published.

The ESRC senior management team does continue to see great value in the review series, and cited the following benefits, arguing the IBR series:

- Provides an authoritative and independent assessment of the international standing of UK research
- Demonstrates the very high quality and important impacts of UK social science research
- Is used extensively in ESRC’s reports to government to strengthen the case for social science funding
- Covers all research, not just the proportion funded by the ESRC
- Applies a mix of quantitative and qualitative indicators, as appropriate to individual disciplines, avoiding less nuanced approaches such as the blanket application of bibliometrics
- Identifies strengths and weaknesses at sub-discipline level, indicating to professional bodies and funders where research capacity might require strengthening
- Generates a shared agenda for the Council to work with other funders and professional bodies to develop the disciplines
- Builds an overarching view of the health of UK social science to inform cross-cutting policy initiatives

The Reviews have proved useful to the ESRC in a number of ways, and in particular they have featured prominently in the Council’s high-level interactions with the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) wherein the ‘weight’ of the international panels’ membership and the rigour of the review process has helped the

ESRC to demonstrate the international standing of UK economics and social science, in line with the government's objectives for research excellence (PSA4 Objective 1).

The series has been useful in promoting UK social science to Government. We use the reports extensively in discussions and negotiations over funding but this will not be visible to many, as research councils can't be seen to be openly 'lobbying' for more money. The recent settlement has been quite good and our ability to point at the IBR reports and show that UK social science is in good shape is important for the outcome. Without the IBR series we would be less well armed and it would be more difficult to argue strongly against cuts or changes of balance across broad disciplines. Demonstrating excellence and international competitiveness will remain a central requirement in deciding future settlements

The ESRC works with other funders and learned societies to address the recommendations of each review, and typically would meet shortly after the publication of a given report to agree an action plan and follow this up after 12 months with a progress meeting. In some cases, of course, the reports inform the private briefings that the ESRC provides to government, but more could be done to keep the wider community informed. A proportion of Panel recommendations relate primarily to the professional bodies and HEIs, however many are directed to the ESRC and the following are a few examples of ESRC-led responses:

- Economics IBR. Identified the need to re-build UK capacity in macroeconomics. In response, the Council worked with HM Treasury to announce funding for new studentships and postdoctoral fellowships in macroeconomics, aimed at attracting both new graduates and professionals from the financial sector and elsewhere into an academic career. This remains a priority area for ESRC capacity-building investment
- Anthropology IBR. Identified the need to encourage more 6th form students to consider studying the discipline at undergraduate level. In response, the Council provided financial support for the Royal Anthropological Institute's work to develop an A-level in anthropology, and to inform teachers and students about anthropology
- Politics IBR. Identified the need for greater concentration of postgraduate training to ensure high-quality provision. This recommendation formed part of the evidence used by the Council when creating its new network of Doctoral Training Centres

The findings and recommendations are often quite generic, and several issues have arisen in more than one of the reviews, and the ESRC has taken note of this advice in its development of funding policies. Examples are:

- Imaginative and riskier research. Several reviews concluded that the ESRC's funding mechanisms were unduly risk-averse in relation to developing new methods and theory. The ESRC has responded directly, redrafting its funding guidelines and assessment criteria, and re-stating innovation as one of the key determinants of its funding decisions, and by publicising more widely a commitment to extend scientific boundaries
- Ph.D. support. Most of the reviews have revealed a demand for more flexible approaches to doctoral training support. The council has responded to this by introducing much more flexibility into the arrangements for our new Doctoral Training Centres

9.2 Lessons learned

The desk research, interviews and surveys strongly suggest that the ESRC got the IBR approach right from the outset, in its basic parameters at least. An informed, peer review is the de facto international standard for these kinds of discipline reviews.

The critical importance of the international panel has been confirmed time and again. Other key success factors have emerged over time: dedicated high-quality support by a professional secretariat, wide-ranging and carefully structured evidence and the need to protect time for the panel to deliberate all it has read and heard.

In the five years or so since the first review was launched, the ESRC officers have learned many lessons, and have been fine-tuning the process continuously, to seek out efficiencies where they can and in particular to maximise the time the panel has to spend with the community.

The first Review addressed one of the Council's smaller funding areas, social anthropology, in order to pilot the new assessment methodology. The second Review also addressed a smaller area, to further support the Council in its efforts to develop a robust, fair and transparent process. The following three reviews, economics, sociology and psychology, addressed three of the Council's core disciplines. In autumn 2010, preparations were in hand for the next two Reviews, which will assess human geography and linguistics respectively. While there is a presumption that all core disciplines should be subject to an International Review, there is no explicit forward programme of Reviews and no commitment to a rolling programme of for example five-yearly assessments.

There has been a succession of procedural refinements, based on the experience of running the early Reviews, which include:

- The extension of the evidence base provided to Panels, with the field and departmental overview, which make use of ESRC statistics and Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) reports for relevant units of assessment, being added to with thematic overviews commissioned from UK-based domain experts on the one hand and comprehensive bibliometrics reports on the other hand. For the Psychology Review, the ESRC allocated a budget of around £8K for the preparation of a short paper based on a survey of at least 150 non-academic research users
- The simplification of logistics, where originally Panels were conducted around the country during their week in the UK, later Reviews have sought to maximise assessment time by basing the Panel in a single location and inviting heads of department and other witnesses to travel to attend Panel hearings. The Economics review was arranged to coincide with the Royal Economic Society's annual conference, a 2-day event in Warwick, in order to maximise the Panel's access to the community
- The solicitation of evidence, departmental submissions and witnesses, has developed as a process and the evidentiary process was more closely managed in the most recent Reviews, as compared with the first Reviews

9.3 Future reviews

There is no formal requirement to continue with the IBR series, and any decision to continue with reviews in future should be contingent upon the findings of this review – as regards the adjudged robustness and value of the process – along with any wider considerations. The EPSRC for example is close to having completed two full rounds of reviews (covering all major disciplines) and commentators believe the process may have run its natural course, having delivered meaningful and wide-ranging improvements to the research council's organisational procedures. Elsewhere the world has moved on too, with a stronger RAE / REF, more robust programme evaluation and a changing balance of investment in favour of larger, grand challenges, more strategic and multi-disciplinary.

As with the EPSRC and the physical sciences, British social science is subject to very many checks and balances, from the appraisal of individual grant applications to the independent evaluation of its centres and programmes and on to the quite exhaustive research assessment exercise (RAE / REF).

Financial pressures abound and every research council we spoke with during the course of the study expressed keen interest in hearing about any procedural innovations that might deliver a similar quality and insight at significantly less cost.

However, the discipline-level perspective remains pretty much unique and the very great majority of contributors to this review believe the approach does deliver valuable insight and experience. Moreover, with a cash price of around £150K, it is an incredibly economical means by which to engage UK social science in a critical dialogue and reflection about itself, with an eminent discussion partner, an international panel comprising members of the world's most distinguished thinkers. Lastly, it is already pretty light-touch, as regards the demands placed on academics and institutions, and might possibly be made even more so in future reviews, subject to further reflection of the recommendations we make below.

We have no hesitation in recommending the ESRC retain the approach, ideally carrying out reviews of each of its key disciplines, periodically, perhaps every 6-7 years perhaps.

But what should those reviews look like? How can they be made more efficient, how might they be made more representative?

We asked all contributors for suggestions about more efficient solutions and we received very little in the way of substantive advice, which tends to suggest that the current arrangements not only work well, but are economical too. Indeed, the great majority of suggestions comprised ideas to derive more value from the investment rather than ideas for cost savings. Most of the efficiency points have been made already, however the following list brings together the sum total of ideas that have arisen:

- Several councils stated that they were using, or were planning to adopt, a more selective and ad hoc approach, mounting reviews only where problems arise and a broader programme of support and remedial work is foreseen. We are conscious that elsewhere our survey and interviews suggested the 'informed peer review' approach was rather better at identifying and applauding strengths and seemingly less good at identifying strengths (self-assessment bias, confidence in the sufficiency of the evidence base, international diplomacy, etc)
- Interviewees and survey respondents suggested stretching the periodicity of the reviews, carrying out benchmarking exercises every 10 years. This might fit quite well with the evolutionary metabolism of disciplines, although we have seen some quite profound changes in the broader environment in the UK and internationally. Moreover, it would not generate any short-term savings of course, as the ESRC is in practice only mid-way through its first cycle. Indeed, the suggestion that this should become more formalised – covering all disciplines in the fullness of time – would increase costs, as even with a 10-year cycle, the ESRC would need to be running one or two reviews every year, which is probably too much of a burden in current financial circumstances
- Several survey respondents argued that the only practicable improvement that they could see, would be to work harder to align the evidentiary requirements of the reviews with those of the REF, wherein the burden of an additional self-assessment process should be reduced greatly, at a stroke, while also improving the quality and substance of those submissions. This might also improve the numbers of departments electing to submit to a review, and these two changes – more and better submissions – might mean the ESRC has to commission fewer independent exercises. This proposal echoes the kind of economic arguments one

sees more generally with regard to standardisation and the resulting improvements in quality and efficiency

- We asked people whether one might reduce or remove the honorarium for the panel members, which is a major cost element for any review. However everyone thought that this would be ill advised and possibly counter-productive. People suggested this was not really about personal income, as the rates are rather low in comparison with the fees that can be secured in commercial consulting or on the after-dinner market, but rather an indication of seriousness; a serious organisation will recompense experts, to not do so might cause people to doubt one is serious. We know from the panel chairs that they do have to devote very substantial amounts of time to the review, and usually considerably more than the estimated 20-person days
- The US chemistry review ran a different process, as compared with the ESRC and research councils included in our international comparison, for reasons to do with the very large scale of the national research undertaking. This group did not visit or meet with individual academics and did not require institutions to prepare self-assessments, but rather relied upon centrally provided statistics and performance metrics and commissioned thematic reviews. The US review also implemented what it called a virtual world congress, to complement the citation analyses, with a structured, multiple co-nomination process being used to generate a current view of the several hundreds of people (and their national and institutional affiliations) the global community considers to be the discipline's foremost thinkers and pathfinders in chemistry research today. It had a much larger panel, comprising national and international experts, and only sat for one session. Lastly, the US chemistry review was content to focus on a narrower set of questions, largely concentrating on benchmarking US research quality in the present and 10-years hence, and seeking to explain any revealed challenges or shortcomings. The review panel was not required to advise the National Academy on next steps
- We asked people whether it might be possible to run the reviews virtually, using increasingly powerful and familiar social networking platforms, and thereby reducing the need for international travel and increasing the proportion of time reviewers spend assessing or deliberating on the evidence they had seen. There was a universally negative response to this suggestion, with everyone arguing that the panel must interact with one another and must interact with the community. Collaborative working platforms might be a useful addition to support the process, and might even facilitate additional interaction and reflection after a visit, but they are no substitute. This seems to be a reasonable position, given the infrequency of the exercise and the unfamiliarity of the panel with one another (by design)

Overall, every efficiency suggestion has one or more evident shortcomings that is more or less fatal! On balance, a more selective application of the approach that makes rather better use of existing data streams might be the only practicable way to economise and particularly with regard to the burden on the community. That said, we reiterate our primary conclusion, which is that the international benchmarking reviews have been very valuable exercises carried out economically.

Turning from cost-saving to value-enhancing, our interviews and survey responses pointed to several potential procedural refinements that might enhance outcomes:

- Consider adding a community-wide consultation to support the review process and encourage wider engagement through increased promotion and a commitment to a more representative process. In most disciplines, a significant proportion of all research is being carried out by academics not in receipt of ESRC grants; a discipline-wide review should strive to capture their views. This suggestion has intrinsic appeal, however it would add cost and time to the review process overall and it is not immediately clear what questions one would ask. There is a sense of people wanting to give individual academics the right to set out their views on the state of the discipline, but through narrative and not some

overly structured questionnaire. However, such an open process would create a major analytical challenge for the ESRC review team or simply overwhelm the panel. If the community could tolerate a technocratic fix, one might consider running a much more particular exercise, to simply nominate (vote or) the most noteworthy areas of work and the best people (current leaders, the next generation); before going on to cite the aspects they believe to be weak in absolute or international terms, topical or methodological developments, and lastly to nominate the two areas where they see the most promising development in the next 10 years, and the two areas where they see the biggest forthcoming challenges. If it were to be done, and there was pretty widespread support for the idea in principle, it will need to be reflected upon further and possibly trialled

- Improve the consistency of the evidence base, from the basic composition analysis (numbers and location of academics and research groups, research centres and projects, expenditure, students, etc) to the commissioned, thematic reviews. Panel members were most critical of the somewhat arbitrary structure and coverage of the thematic reviews and opinion pieces. Arguably this evidentiary work should be fresh for a review, and would need to be completed within a reasonably short timeframe, perhaps over 3-4 months and at least three months before the visit. From our own desk research, we can see there would be value in a more clearly labelled evidence portfolio, with classes of evidence being tagged appropriate and in all cases, the material ought to observe more closely the key questions, reporting structures and stylistic principles. An accompanying explanatory note, would be a valuable key too. Lastly, it might be helpful to develop specific guidance for witnesses
- Expand and improve the bibliometrics analyses and use these as a matter of course in all reviews. The quality and familiarity of bibliometrics work has improved significantly in the past five years, and participants from across all five subject areas, including anthropology, expressed the opinion that these techniques could provide a valuable means by which to reveal apparent areas of strengths and weakness, which the panel could probe more closely. The panel chairs in particular wanted to see more exacting metrics, and not just field citation averages (e.g. share of publications in top 10% or share of outputs that have double or quadruple the international average for the field)
- Possibly look to use the reviews as a platform for supporting the development of the learned societies, perhaps helping them to run some kind of regular updates say every couple of years ago. Several interviewees suggested it might be possible for the ESRC to work with learned societies such that these organisations might take the lead in preparing periodical reviews – every couple of years – of the state of the discipline
- Sharpen the focus of the reviews, with a standard set of top-line questions. Define a longer list of subsidiary questions for each headline question, which a panel might choose from in line with the situation on the ground and any issues that reveal themselves in the analysis of the evidence. Possibly expand the current headline question-set to include an explicit requirement for each panel to look at (i) international collaboration and researcher training, as key aspects of preparing for the future, and (ii) external relations with non-academic communities
- Place more of the review in the public domain, ahead of the panel visit (e.g. the review terms of reference, working definitions, data collection templates and guidance material)
- Require each panel to publish a summary of its findings, reporting against each of the top-line questions, and focusing on discipline-specific qualities and achievements
- Add a formal commitment to the overarching IBR model, following the EPSRC Town Hall approach, wherein the ESRC and the learned societies schedule a

public event for the community more generally to hear from the panel and to debate the findings and recommendations, and using this as the basis for the ESRC to finalise its own response to the report

- Add a commitment overarching IBR model wherein the ESRC would go on to publish a formal response to each review, following the community debate, and with an accompanying action plan that would be reported upon annually for several years after the review, with progress being reported publicly on the review web pages, within the overall annual reporting framework and more flexibly through circulation of updates to the panel members and other key contributors

In summary, we suggest there is a good case for further refinements to the structure and consistency of the evidence base and, most importantly, to greatly improve transparency around follow-up actions and outcomes.

10. Conclusions and Recommendations

10.1 Introduction

This final section of our report provides a summary of our conclusions and recommendations, abridged from the previous sections and presented against the main evaluation questions.

10.2 The robustness of the IBR methodology

The international benchmarking methodology is robust and fit for purpose. The IBR approach is widely regarded by all stakeholders to be an example of good practice and to produce – consistently – credible and creditable findings and recommendations.

The use of an international panel is entirely appropriate for carrying out an independent and authoritative assessment of the state of a discipline, and the ESRC and the learned societies have been successful in attracting experts of the highest calibre. The composition of expertise has been reasonable, although this is one area where the size of a (manageable) panel must lead to some compromises.

The use of a set of standard questions has been helpful to the ESRC team coordinating the individual reviews, providing a core stability to permit incremental improvements and evolution in principles and methods.

10.3 Key IBR conclusions and impacts

Overall, the four published reviews all concluded that a good part of their respective UK research community is involved in work that is worldclass, and that UK social scientists are influential on the global stage. In each case, our survey respondents and interviews agreed overwhelmingly with the overarching conclusion.

There are few strong patterns evident across the conclusions of the four Reviews, although the reviews have each highlighted, as both a strength and a weakness, two issues, which are empiricism on the one hand and English language / linguistic issues on the other. The following bullets list a series of other points of note:

- The Economics Review is the only one of the four reviews that made a categorical statement confirming the international standing of UK economics research overall, and its world leadership in several core disciplines. The other three reviews were rather more discursive and listed areas where the UK communities were deemed to be especially strong
- Each of the reports flagged thematic weaknesses, whether that was macroeconomics and finance (economics) or quantitative research methods (sociology)
- Capacity issues are dealt with at considerable length, although again the particularities of the disciplines and the varied styles of the authors does militate against a neat synthesis of conclusions. Much of the feedback here was concerned with perceived shortcomings, for example, about what were judged to be the limited opportunities for doctoral students and early career researchers and the undue burden on exporter disciplines
- The reviews dealt only lightly with non-academic impacts, struggling somewhat with the limited material that was presented
- The discussion of future opportunities and challenges was treated rather briefly and focused on policy and funding issues for the most part, so for example, the need to fund a greater proportion of research that is imaginative or risky. The

economics and sociology reviews argued that concerted efforts were required on macroeconomics and quantitative research methods respectively

The individual reviews each made recommendations that tended to relate to generic issues – greater support for riskier research, more and better studentships and fellowships – rather than discipline specific concerns. The following bullet points provide an overview of the sorts of recommendations made:

- On research quality three of the four Reviews made concrete suggestions, one thematic, one methodological and one about novelty: Macroeconomics requires strengthening. Sociological methodologies need to be realigned. Anthropology needs more imaginative proposals
- Capacity issues are concerned with researcher training for the most part, with three of the four Reviews suggesting more might usefully be done to expand or strengthen doctoral training programmes
- The sociology review called for the ESRC and the community to work together to strengthen the institutional organisation of sociology as a discipline, while preserving its intellectual diversity
- Public visibility emerged as an issue for three of the reviews, with panels arguing that disciplines needed to do much more to showcase their work and the results of their work, bringing it to the attention of funders, policy makers and the public

Moving on from the individual reviews' conclusions and recommendations, this current exercise is the first formal attempt to detail the impacts of the reviews on the ESRC or the particular disciplines.

The first point to be made is that the great majority of our interviewees and survey respondents had no view of the outcomes of the reviews, with most people simply noting their role as a contributor to the review and underlining the absence of any subsequent feedback (to them). The chairs of the review steering groups were the exception to this general rule, and these (mostly former) presidents of the learned societies were unequivocal, arguing that the reviews had 'held up a mirror' to the discipline and prompted further debate and self-analysis through seminars and working groups.

The ESRC senior management team did have a good view of outcomes, in contrast to the wider academic communities, and did explain its subsequent work with other funders and learned societies to address the recommendations of each review. The following actions are a few examples of ESRC responses:

- Economics IBR. Identified the need to re-build UK capacity in macroeconomics. In response, the Council worked with HM Treasury to announce funding for new studentships and postdoctoral fellowships in macroeconomics, aimed at attracting both new graduates and professionals from the financial sector and elsewhere into an academic career. This remains a priority area for ESRC capacity-building investment
- Anthropology IBR. Identified the need to encourage more 6th form students to consider studying the discipline at undergraduate level. In response, the Council provided financial support for the Royal Anthropological Institute's work to develop an A-level in anthropology, and to inform teachers and students about anthropology
- Politics IBR. Identified the need for greater concentration of postgraduate training to ensure high-quality provision. This recommendation formed part of the evidence used by the Council when creating its new network of Doctoral Training Centres

- Imaginative and riskier research. Several reviews concluded that the ESRC's funding mechanisms were unduly risk-averse in relation to developing new methods and theory. The ESRC has responded directly, redrafting its funding guidelines and assessment criteria, and re-stating innovation as one of the key determinants of its funding decisions, and by publicising more widely a commitment to extend scientific boundaries
- Ph.D. support. Most of the reviews have revealed a demand for more flexible approaches to doctoral training support. The council has responded to this by introducing much more flexibility into the arrangements for our new Doctoral Training Centres

10.4 The contribution of the Learned Societies

The partnership approach is central to the IBR model, and reflects a practical reality on the one hand, as the ESRC is just one source of research funding, and, on the other, its cultural values as regards academic freedoms.

We conclude that the partnership model is appropriate, and that the ESRC should continue to involve learned societies in framing reviews and helping to identify nominees for the panel chairperson and members.

There was universal agreement across each of our main groups of interviewees as to the appropriateness of the partnership model, and the improved credibility, engagement and insight that ought to derive from a collaborative format. Our desk research similarly confirms that this is general practice: the partnership approach is followed by the EPSRC – even more determinedly – and by all but one of the overseas reviews we looked at, including Finland, Sweden and the US.

There are attendant risks, as individual learned societies will have, by design, a particular agenda and will represent the interests of only some of the academic communities in scope.

The ESRC has done well in managing those risks with its wide-ranging and open discussions with all learned societies, and for practical reasons, it seems reasonable to continue to appoint the chair of the review steering group from one or other of the larger learned societies. However, there would be merit in expanding the commitment to a fully open and transparent process, using stakeholder mapping techniques to identify all relevant groupings and exploring opportunities to involve more of these key groups (e.g. public and private-sector research users, practitioners, employers [vice chancellors], etc) and possibly adding in perhaps two lay members to keep everyone on their toes. It might even make sense to have the open and closing discussions held in public.

10.5 The IBR series in comparison with other similar reviews

The IBR series is state of the art and compares very favourably with the small selection of other international review procedures looked at as part of this review.

There is a great deal of commonality as regards the core approach – the international panel considering a broad mix of qualitative and quantitative evidence, tested through select-committee style hearings – and the core questions. There is broad alignment of pricing and timing too.

The US Chemistry Review was the main exception, however international reviews are relatively rare in the US and scale factors meant that the review panel relied far more on secondary data and metrics.

The only material difference between the ESRC approach and that of the other councils revolved around the dissemination and implementation of the review findings, where other research councils tend to treat this more formally, with a requirement to present the results at a national dissemination event, publish an official response to the advice (with action plan) and report on progress, periodically.

10.6 Value for money of the IBR series

We conclude that the IBR series has provided the ESRC and its respective academic communities with good value for money, when judged against the quite reasonable implementation costs and the reported benefits to the ESRC in particular but also to the learned societies.

There is no obvious alternative to the IBR series. The ESRC's thematic and programmatic evaluations are unlikely to engage and animate communities to the same degree as would a panel of eminent academic peers, critical friends. The national research assessment exercise (RAE2008, REF2014) misses the IBR's international dimension too, and is much less holistic and perceptive in its approach.

10.7 Overall success, lessons learned and future reviews

10.7.1 Overall success

The IBR process is well-regarded by the very great majority of people that provided feedback. Its focus on disciplines is essentially unique, and it adds real value to the other evaluation procedures in operation, whether that is ESRC thematic evaluations or the country's research assessment exercise. The international perspective is also very distinctive and widely respected.

The ESRC approach to international benchmarking is believed to be best-in-class by a majority of those that have been involved with the IBR process and also have knowledge of other broadly analogous discipline-level reviews. Moreover, our desk research confirms the ESRC model aligns well with good practice in other scientific nations.

While many individual academics expressed uncertainty about the use of the reviews, the learned societies were strongly positive, arguing that the reviews were a valuable opportunity for self-reflection, and that reports had highlighted issues – from gender to training in research methods, that were being debated even now; the reviews had been a source of animation. The politics review is perhaps the one area where the UK academics and learned societies were less persuaded of its value, which relates in large part to the very different judgement rendered by the RAE some two years after the politics report was published.

The ESRC was similarly positive and its senior management team believes the IBR series has been a success, and cited the following benefits, arguing the IBR series:

- Provides an authoritative and independent assessment of the international standing of UK research
- Demonstrates the very high quality and important impacts of UK social science research
- Is used extensively in ESRC's reports to government to strengthen the case for social science funding
- Covers all research, not just the proportion funded by the ESRC
- Applies a mix of quantitative and qualitative indicators, as appropriate to individual disciplines, avoiding less nuanced approaches such as the blanket application of bibliometrics
- Identifies strengths and weaknesses at sub-discipline level, indicating to professional bodies and funders where research capacity might require strengthening
- Generates a shared agenda for the Council to work with other funders and professional bodies to develop the disciplines

- Builds an overarching view of the health of UK social science to inform cross-cutting policy initiatives

10.7.2 Lessons learned

The desk research, interviews and surveys suggest that the ESRC got the IBR approach right from the outset, in its basic parameters at least. An informed, peer review is the de facto international standard for these kinds of discipline reviews. The critical importance of the international panel has been confirmed time and again.

Other key success factors have emerged over time: dedicated high-quality support by a professional secretariat, wide-ranging and carefully structured evidence and the need to protect time for the panel to deliberate all it has read and heard.

In the five years or so since the first review was launched, the ESRC officers have learned many lessons, and have been fine-tuning the process continuously, to seek out efficiencies where they can and in particular to maximise the time the panel has to spend with the community. The ESRC officers have also concluded that a medium-sized panel of 8-10 experts offers the best compromise between effective group working and breadth of specialist expertise.

There has been a succession of procedural refinements, based on the experience of running the early Reviews, which include:

- The extension of the evidence base provided to Panels, with the addition of for example thematic overviews commissioned from UK-based domain experts and surveys of non-academic research users
- The simplification of logistics, where originally Panels were conducted around the country during their week in the UK, later Reviews have sought to maximise assessment time by basing the Panel in a single location and inviting witnesses to travel to attend Panel hearings

10.7.3 Future reviews

British social science is subject to very many checks and balances, from the appraisal of individual grant applications to the independent evaluation of its centres and programmes and on to the periodical, UK-wide assessment of all departments and disciplines through the RAE / REF.

However, the discipline-level perspective remains pretty much unique and the very great majority of contributors to this review believe the approach delivers valuable insight and experience. Moreover, with a cash price of around £150K, it is an incredibly economical means by which to engage UK social science in a critical dialogue and reflection about itself.

While a small minority of respondents suggested that the funds might be better spent on research in these straitened times, the very great majority see value in the ESRC continuing with the review series, subject, arguably to improving the exploitation of the findings and recommendations.

We have no hesitation in recommending the ESRC retain the approach, ideally carrying out reviews of each of its key disciplines, periodically, perhaps every 6-7 years perhaps. But what should those reviews look like? How can they be made more efficient, how might they be made more consequential?

We asked all contributors for suggestions about more efficient solutions and we received very little in the way of substantive advice, which tends to suggest that the current arrangements not only work well, but are economical too. Indeed, the great majority of suggestions comprised ideas to derive more value from the investment rather than ideas for cost savings. We turn to these below.

10.8 Our recommendations to the ESRC

We recommend the ESRC continue to implement international benchmarking reviews, at least until it has completed a full cycle of each of its core disciplines, and that it should continue to follow its current approach in broad measure.

We see three inter-related areas where the ESRC might usefully take action to further develop the IBR approach, which are to:

- Improve the standard dissemination arrangements, through a more substantive web presence (disclosing / sharing more about the review process and the evidence, along the way) and a formal commitment to broadcast news of each review through all available channels, whether that is a news item in the ESRC Society Today announcing the launch of an exercise or an article in the newsletters of relevant learned societies, ideally including the British Academy, debating the issues raised in the published report. The addition of a town-hall style event, at the conclusion of each review, would also be a useful development. Where practicable and affordable, it would be helpful to involve the panel chairperson in this closing event
- Add a formal commitment to the IBR ‘standard operating procedures,’ wherein the ESRC would publish a formal response to the findings and recommendations of each review within a reasonable period following the town hall meeting (e.g. 3 months). The response should include an action plan and timetable, and ideally the council should issue a progress note on each action plan – very brief – as part of its annual reporting procedure. At the risk of being unduly burdensome, this might form the basis for a short circular to provide feedback on progress and outcomes to panel and steering group members, learned societies and academics
- Improve the evidence base of the reviews, both with respect to the packaging and labelling of material, so the panel might better understand its relevance to the review process, and its provenance, and the quality and consistency of the individual elements. The commissioned thematic reviews were somewhat idiosyncratic for example and the bibliometric analyses were too limited (e.g. as regards the spread of international comparators; or the range of metrics used to profile performance)
- Improve engagement with the academic community, to ensure a more comprehensive and representative set of contributions. Improving the dissemination arrangements will help here, as will a more formal and transparent management of the implementation of a review’s findings. However, there might be a further improvement in the reach of the reviews if each exercise included a community-wide consultation, an opportunity for any academic or research student to proffer his or her views on strengths and weaknesses and future opportunities, for example

Lastly, in recognition of the fact that improvements on the above dimensions is likely to add to the cost of a benchmarking exercise, while hopefully adding far more to the value derived, we recommend the ESRC reflect on the appropriateness of evolving its evidentiary requirements to align more closely with the evidence HEIs will be required to assemble for the forthcoming Research Excellence Framework (REF). The institutional submissions to the last RAE for example, suggest that individual departments ought to be in a position to quickly and efficiently assemble an overview of their principal research groups, current staff and students, recent outputs and key sources of income. Similarly, the RA5 ‘esteem’ form amounts to a qualitative statement as regards a given department’s recent research highlights and successes and its plans and ambitions for the future, which is something that a growing number of HEIs ask all departments to report on annually. REF2014 might add bibliometrics to the assessment mix, however it’s not clear there is widespread capacity or appetite amongst HEIs to routinely assemble and analyse such metrics. In this respect, the ESRC will almost certainly need to commission its own bibliometrics analyses for each review. The REF has made a more definitive commitment to

consider non-academic research impact, however, and the funding councils have published impact case study templates that many HEI departments are beginning to use to develop their own catalogue of research benefits. This might very well provide a new (low cost) source of additional evidence to feed into the IBR process.

Appendix A Checklist for telephone interviews

A. The robustness of the Review methodology

1. *To what extent do you believe the IBR methodology was able to determine robustly the current position of UK research compared with the best worldwide?*
2. *To what extent do you believe the IBR methodology was able to assess each of the other key questions set out in the terms of reference?*
3. *Were any aspects of the Review process problematic?*
4. *What one practicable change, if any, would you recommend to the ESRC, which you believe would improve the robustness of the methodology?*

B. Comparison of the IBR with similar reviews conducted elsewhere

5. *To what extent do you believe the IBR series follows good practice internationally?*
6. *Does any research funding body evidently make a better job of carrying out these sorts of international reviews, and if so how are they more robust?*
7. *Please describe any aspect of these other agencies' methodologies that you believe might usefully be incorporated by the ESRC as part of its Review process.*

C. Contribution of the learned societies to the Review

8. *What were the key contributions made by learned societies to the successful conduct of the Review and the implementation of its findings?*
9. *How important was the partnership approach to the Review?*
10. *What more might one ask of the learned societies, if anything, in future Reviews?*

D. Key conclusions and impacts of the IBR series

11. *What do you consider to have been the key conclusions reached by the Panel?*
12. *What do you believe the UK academic community might have learnt from the Review?*
13. *Which of the panel's recommendations have led to specific actions for improvement?*
14. *What if any improvement(s) do you expect to arise as a result of the implementation of those recommendations?*
15. *What do you see as being the unique contribution of the IBR series, in comparison with other assessments carried out by ESRC or other research funding bodies in the UK?*

E. Any other comments on the IBR series

16. *Overall, how do you judge the value for money offered by the Review process?*
17. *What one practicable change would you recommend to the ESRC, which you believe might improve the efficiency of the Review process without compromising its robustness?*
18. *Please provide any other comments you would like to make as regards the future of the International Benchmarking Review series*

Appendix B Survey of witnesses that made contributions to the International Benchmarking Review of UK Sociology

Introduction

A single questionnaire was developed, asking the same questions of all types of contributor and for all reviews. The ambition had been to examine any differences in respondents' views across discipline areas and Reviews and amongst different stakeholders. We made two minor modifications to this 'standard' questionnaire, which in practical terms meant we issued 10 variants of the questionnaire:

- The penultimate question invited people to judge the extent to which panel recommendations had been implemented, a generic question, but applied to the specific recommendations taken from the published reports of the four reviews that had been completed at the time of the November 2010 survey. In recognition of the fact the psychology review was in progress, we removed the latter questions from the questionnaire circulated to people involved in the psychology review
- Moreover, we directed a modified version of the questionnaire to the 40 or so panel and steering committee members, omitting several of the closed questions for example about the implementation of their recommendations

In the event, the survey captured a good proportion of responses from people that had been involved in the more recent reviews, but rather fewer from the earlier exercises. The social anthropology and politics reviews proved particularly problematic, as these exercises had been conducted at least four years earlier and in addition we had a rather smaller list of named contributors to poll.

Figure 19 Distribution of responses by review and type of respondent (n = 104)

Date	Review	Respondents
2006	Social Anthropology	6
2007	Politics	6
2008	Economics	15
2010	Sociology	31
2011	Psychology	35
2006-11	Total witnesses and other review contributors	93
2006-11	Total members of the International Panels	11
2006-11	Total all types of respondent	104

In light of the small number of responses for Social Anthropology and Politics, and the unevenness in responses more generally, we concluded it was most appropriate to work with the 104 returns in the round. Notwithstanding the risks of bias from small numbers, we did check the responses – question by question – for any *marked* differences between reviews and respondents, and there were few indications of contrasting views across the communities. Indeed, these splits suggest consistency, over time and across disciplines.

The questionnaire

A. Robustness of the International Benchmarking Review (IBR) methodology

19. To what extent do you believe the IBR approach was able to determine robustly the position in the UK compared with the best worldwide? Please rate, using a scale 1 to 5 where 1 is low and 5 is high, how well the Review did each of the following

Dimension	No opinion	Rating (1 – 5)
Benchmark UK research quality against best in the world	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Reveal key strengths	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Identify principal weaknesses	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Identify the sustainability of research capacity	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Identify impacts on policy or practice	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Identify challenges and opportunities for UK in next 10 years	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

20. For each aspect of the Review process where you have a view, please rate the robustness of its design, using a scale 1 to 5 where 1 is low and 5 is high:

Dimension	No opinion	Rating (1 – 5)
The scope of the Review and its core questions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The role, competence or composition of the International Panel	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The governance arrangements, involving ESRC / learned societies	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The departmental submissions, provided to the Review Panel	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other evidence provided to the Review Panel	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The hearings / witnesses presenting to the Review Panel	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Organisation of the review e.g. itinerary, visits, poster sessions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The arrangements to facilitate implementation of Review findings	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

21. What, if any, practicable change would you recommend to the ESRC, which you believe would improve the robustness of the methodology (i.e. its ability to perform strongly in spite of data limitations and other challenges)?

22. Please provide any other comment you might wish to make regarding the robustness of the IBR methodology, and the Panel's ability to benchmark UK research internationally

B. Comparison of the IBR with similar reviews conducted elsewhere

23. Are you aware of discipline-level reviews carried out by other research funding bodies, either here in the UK or abroad?

Yes No

24. If yes, to what extent do you believe the IBR series follows good practice internationally with respect to discipline-level reviews? Please rate each aspect, where 1 is low and 5 is high (sets the benchmark for international practice)

Dimension	No opinion	Rating (1 – 5)
The scope of the Review and its core questions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The role, competence or composition of the Panel	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The governance arrangements	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The evidence base provided to the Review Panel	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Organisation e.g. Timetable, administrative support	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The dissemination and implementation of Review findings	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

25. Please name any similar benchmarking programme(s) – in the UK or further afield – that you believe the ESRC might possibly be able to learn from

26. Please describe any aspect of these other reviews that you believe might usefully be incorporated by the ESRC as part of its Review process, in order to strengthen that process. It would be helpful if you would also indicate the likely benefits of such a change

C. Contribution of the learned societies to the Review

27. To what extent did the learned societies play a critical role in the Review process? Please rate the importance of their collective inputs to each of the following elements of the Review, using a scale 1 to 5 where 1 is low and 5 is high

Dimension	No opinion	Rating (1 – 5)
Inputs to the Review Partnership overall	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The population / constitution of the Panel	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The engagement of the academic community	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The evidence base provided to the Review Panel	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The governance / oversight of the process / findings	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The dissemination of Review findings	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The implementation of Review findings	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

28. What more might one ask of the learned societies, in future Reviews? And to what end?

D. Key conclusions and impacts of the IBR series

29. To what extent do you agree that the conclusions reached by the Panel were insightful and produced findings additional to what was already known or accepted by the community?

Very low	Low	Medium	High	Very High	No opinion
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

30. Which of the Panel's recommendations have led to specific actions for improvement?

Dimension	No view	Action taken
Strengthen the organisation of the discipline, while preserving its diversity	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Bring sociological research methodologies in closer alignment with institutional and international state-of-the-art standards	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Provide incentives for developing international cooperation, training and comparative research	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Define 'impact measures' and criteria to maximise the actual societal impacts of sociology	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Enhance sociology's academic and public standing by reinforcing its visibility and authority	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

31. What if any improvement(s) have arisen as a result of those recommendations?

32. Overall, how do you judge the impact of the Review process on the discipline as a whole?

Very low	Low	Medium	High	Very High	No opinion
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

33. What do you see as being the unique contribution of the IBR series, in comparison with other assessments carried out by ESRC (e.g. programme evaluations or analyses or project outputs) or others (e.g. RAE / REF assessments of quality and impact)?

34. With an average cash cost of around £150K for each IBR, how do you judge the value for money offered by the Review process?

Very low	Low	Medium	High	Very High	No opinion
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

35. What one practicable change would you recommend to the ESRC, which you believe might improve the efficiency of the Review process without compromising its robustness?

E. Any other comments on the IBR series

36. Please provide any other comment(s) you would like to make, particularly regarding the future of the International Benchmarking Review series

37. Would you like to be notified when the evaluation report is published, in spring 2011?

technopolis_[group]

Yes No

Appendix C Survey of members of steering committees and international panels

Your name	
Organisation	
Email number	
Contact telephone number	

A. Robustness of the International Benchmarking Review (IBR) methodology

1. To what extent do you believe the IBR approach was able to determine robustly the position in the UK compared with the best worldwide? Please rate, using a scale 1 to 5 where 1 is low and 5 is high, how well the Review did each of the following

Dimension	No opinion	Rating (1 – 5)
Benchmark UK research quality against best in the world	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Reveal key strengths	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Identify principal weaknesses	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Identify the sustainability of research capacity	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Identify impacts on policy or practice	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Identify challenges and opportunities for UK in next 10 years	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

2. For each aspect of the Review process where you have a view, please rate the robustness of its design, using a scale 1 to 5 where 1 is low and 5 is high:

Dimension	No opinion	Rating (1 – 5)
The scope of the Review and its core questions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The role, competence or composition of the International Panel	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The governance arrangements, involving ESRC / learned societies	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The departmental submissions, provided to the Review Panel	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other evidence provided to the Review Panel	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The hearings / witnesses presenting to the Review Panel	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Organisation of the review e.g. itinerary, visits, poster sessions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The arrangements to facilitate implementation of Review findings	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

3. What, if any, practicable change would you recommend to the ESRC, which you believe would improve the robustness of the methodology (i.e. its ability to perform strongly in spite of data limitations and other challenges)?

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4. Please provide any other comment you might wish to make regarding the robustness of the IBR methodology, and the Panel's ability to benchmark UK research internationally

B. Comparison of the IBR with similar reviews conducted elsewhere

5. Are you aware of discipline-level reviews carried out by other research funding bodies, either here in the UK or abroad?

Yes No

6. If yes, to what extent do you believe the IBR series follows good practice internationally with respect to discipline-level reviews? Please rate each aspect, where 1 is low and 5 is high (sets the benchmark for international practice)

Dimension	No opinion	Rating (1 – 5)
The scope of the Review and its core questions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The role, competence or composition of the Panel	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The governance arrangements	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The evidence base provided to the Review Panel	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Organisation e.g. Timetable, administrative support	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The dissemination and implementation of Review findings	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

7. Please name any similar benchmarking programme(s) – in the UK or further afield – that you believe the ESRC might possibly be able to learn from

8. Please describe any aspect of these other reviews that you believe might usefully be incorporated by the ESRC as part of its Review process, in order to strengthen that process. It would be helpful if you would also indicate the likely benefits of such a change

C. Contribution of the learned societies to the Review

9. To what extent did the learned societies play a critical role in the Review process? Please rate the importance of their collective inputs to each of the following elements of the Review, using a scale 1 to 5 where 1 is low and 5 is high

Dimension	No opinion	Rating (1 – 5)
Inputs to the Review Partnership overall	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The population / constitution of the Panel	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The engagement of the academic community	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The evidence base provided to the Review Panel	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The governance / oversight of the process / findings	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The dissemination of Review findings	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The implementation of Review findings	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

10. What more might one ask of the learned societies, in future Reviews? And to what end?

D. Key conclusions and impacts of the IBR series

11. What do you consider to have been the most important conclusion reached by the Panel?

12. What do you believe the UK academic community might have learnt from the Review, with respect to its international standing?

13. Which of the panel's recommendations do you believe has led to specific actions for improvement?

14. What if any improvement(s) have arisen as a result of those actions?

15. What do you see as being the unique contribution of the IBR series, in comparison with other assessments carried out by ESRC (e.g. programme evaluations or analyses or project outputs) or others (e.g. RAE / REF assessments of quality and impact)?

E. Any other comments on the IBR series

16. With an average cash cost of around £150K for each IBR, how do you judge the value for money offered by the Review process?

Very low	Low	Medium	High	Very High	No opinion
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

17. What one practicable change would you recommend to the ESRC, which you believe might improve the efficiency of the Review process without compromising its robustness?

18. Please provide any other comment(s) you would like to make, particularly regarding the future of the International Benchmarking Review series

19. Would you like to be notified when the evaluation report is published, in spring 2011?

Yes No

Thank you for your time