

Review of the ESRC national centre for research methods

Executive summary

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Introduction

The ESRC National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM) forms part of ESRC's strategy to improve the standards of research methods across the UK social science community. The aim of the NCRM is to provide a focal point for research, training and capacity building activities. These activities are intended to promote a step change in the quality and range of methodological skills and techniques used by the UK social science community, and provide support for, and dissemination of, methodological innovation and excellence within the UK.

In the spring of 2012, the ESRC instigated a Review of the NCRM in order to inform decisions on the relevance and continued funding of the activities undertaken by the NCRM beyond 2014, and how the research/services required might be optimally delivered in the future.

The Review was undertaken by an expert Panel, supported by the ESRC office.

The NCRM – history, structure and current activities

The NCRM as a whole has the following key objectives:

- to advance methodological understanding and practice across the social science community
- to enhance the UK international profile in methodological excellence and to ensure that the UK is at the forefront of international developments in social research methodology
- to play a strategic role in the promotion of high quality social research methodology that involves inter-agency initiatives, including but not limited to those funded by the ESRC
- to co-ordinate and to add value to other investments of the ESRC that are concerned to enhance the methodological sophistication and techniques and skills of current and future generations of social researchers
- to connect new methods and integrate them into the training of social science researchers

The Centre was established with a 'Hub and Node' organisational structure, with the Hub providing coordination, infrastructure, strategic leadership and continuity and the Nodes

taking forward the research and training programme in advanced social science research methods.

The NCRM Hub at Southampton is responsible for the commissioning and oversight of the Nodes. In addition the Hub is responsible for:

- Training and Capacity Building, through the Research Methods Festival; CASS (Courses for Applied Social Surveys); the annual research methods Autumn School for early career researchers; the Training Bursaries Scheme; and the NCRM website. In addition, closely linked to but independent of NCRM is the ReStore archive of training materials
- Dissemination and Engagement through: the Research Methods Festival; the Networks for Methodological Innovation (NMI) programme; the Centre website; digital media; conferences and dissemination events; publications. It also organises a programme of international links
- Research; the Hub also conducts its own programme of methodological research

Commentary and evaluation

The work of the nodes

In general the research and development work of the Nodes is of very high quality. Without the specialist funding made available through NCRM, methodological innovation on such a scale would not have been achieved. As such, the collective outputs and achievements of the NCRM Node programme are probably unique in the world. NCRM is widely seen as a highly respected kite mark.

Nodes are also charged with providing training and capacity development activities relevant to their areas of expertise. In most cases there was good evidence that courses offered by Nodes have been well attended and most would also appear to be highly valued by their participants. Nevertheless a number of weaknesses in this provision were noticeable in terms variation of the types of training and professional development different Nodes offered (from basic to advanced), their geographical reach and the extent to which training was sustained after a Node had completed. The Review Panel was also unconvinced that all methodological development projects needed to be of the same three year duration.

The Review Panel therefore recommends:

Up to 2014

- the Centre should continue its drive to make more training materials available online through a central repository
- the Centre should consider how it can use existing resources in order to sustain high quality training provision that has been developed by previous Nodes

In any re-commissioning

- that the funding model for Nodes is reconsidered with a view to introducing greater flexibility in the length of projects
- that attention is paid to the geographical spread of Nodes
- that the Hub provides greater clarity on the types of training provision that it considers appropriate for Nodes to provide
- that the training offered by Nodes should focus primarily on advanced training directly derived from their methodological development
- that all Nodes are required to develop programmes of materials that can be archived for future use on ReStore
- that resourcing is planned in order to ensure that high quality training continues to be made available by the Centre beyond the duration of any particular Node

The work of the hub

In relation to training and capacity building the achievements of the Hub are impressive. The Hub offers a wide range of training and capacity building events each year which would appear to be very well received by those who attend. There is also evidence that the Hub has made significant achievements in terms of dissemination and engagement, though there was less consistent evidence of the impact in relation to international links. While the Review Panel acknowledge the importance of Hub staff undertaking research, the strategic value of the Hub's current research programme was less clear.

The Review Panel therefore recommends:

- that the Centre should review all of its international activities including its formal linkages in order to ensure that this aspect of its work is more strategically planned than at present
- that in future, Hub research should be more explicitly driven by the strategic needs of the Centre as a whole rather than by the interests of individual members of staff
- that in any future re-commissioning of ReStore thought is given to further integration with the NCRM

The relationship and collaboration with other ESRC and non-ESRC research and resource investment

The Review Panel was satisfied with the Centre's performance in terms of its links with other research methods investments. However, it was also aware of the continuing need for the Centre to update and develop those links. Of particular importance for the future will be the Centre's links with the ESRC's Doctoral Training Centres (DTCs).

The Review Panel therefore recommends:

- the Centre should ensure wherever possible that NCRM training is fully integrated with that provided as part of the DTC network, avoiding duplication

- in the longer term, that the ESRC in collaboration with NCRM and the DTCs actively consider how a strategic relationship between the NCRM and the DTC network might best be conceptualised and taken forward

The impact of NCRM beyond academia

The Review Panel found many examples of how NCRM courses are greatly appreciated by attendees from the wider community, not only because of the quality of the events but also through the opportunities to share experiences and to network with other researchers. However, overall, it found only a low level of awareness of NCRM's fundamental role in advanced research methods among the social science community beyond academia. Therefore the Review Panel found that while this aspect of NCRM's remit is being addressed, much more could be done.

The Review Panel therefore recommends

- that the Centre review its strategic links with research communities beyond academia with a view to further raising awareness of the NCRM and in order to strengthen its understanding of training and capacity development needs of these communities.

Centre organisation, management and leadership

NCRM's organisational structure, with its Hub and Node model is distinctive in terms of ESRC investments. The advantages of the model are that it has allowed considerable flexibility in terms of funding while at the same time maintaining continuity. There are, however, tensions in terms of the coherence that arise as a result of the Nodes being commissioned independently of the Hub through an ESRC open call. The Review Panel was of the view that greater coherence in the programme would be essential in any re-commissioning. This could be achieved without sacrificing the merits of the open call procedure if the Director were required to develop a much more detailed Node call specification than at present and if he/she were more fully involved in the preliminary vetting of proposals against that specification.

The Panel also noted a particular difficulty that might arise in relation to the timetabling of any re-commissioning of the Hub and Nodes. Finally the Review Panel was concerned that the Advisory Committee structure was not working as effectively as it might.

The Review Panel therefore recommends:

- the Centre should continue to support and encourage academic interchange between the Nodes
- that in any future Node selection process, the ESRC should aim to increase the coherence of the programme by requiring the Director to develop a detailed specification for the call and by involving him/her fully in the preliminary vetting of proposals against that specification

- that the ESRC reviews the timetable for any re-commissioning in order to ensure that a future Hub and its Director have the opportunity to play a full role in the commissioning of further Nodes
- that the Hub reviews the Terms of Reference for the Advisory Committee with a view to clarifying its role and particularly its relationship with the Director
- that in the ESRC re-considers the role the Advisory Committee in order for it to focus more explicitly on strategic issues including the commissioning of future Nodes. It should also consider the potential representation of the Nodes on the Committee

Questions about the operation of the current NCRM model

Overall the NCRM has many strengths. It has provided a stimulus and framework for a rich programme of advanced research methods development and provided a highly valuable training and capacity development resource or ‘facility’ for the whole social science community. However, despite its good work, it was not entirely clear to the Panel how NCRM fitted into the larger picture of ESRC investments in research methods work. Clarity on this point will be of growing importance as the DTCs begin to take on more and more responsibility. Should NCRM continue to aspire to be the central coordinating body for **all** research methods training and capacity development in the UK? If so, the Centre needs to be re-conceptualised in a way that formalises that coordinating role in relation to other ESRC initiatives; it should also be required to take on more intellectual leadership of the field. Alternatively should its future role be a more restricted one, focusing primarily on methodological development and advanced training together with one or two specific activities such as the management of ReStore and the Research Methods Festival? In the light of these questions and particularly the changing landscape for methods training, before any re-commissioning, the ESRC therefore needs to clarify NCRM’s essential purposes in relation to its other investments and activities.

The Review Panel therefore recommends:

That before any re-commissioning:

- the ESRC undertakes a more extensive strategic review of how it coordinates and implements research methods training across all of its key committees, subject area panels and the DTCs with the aim of clarifying the future role of the NCRM within that range of provision

If the Centre is re-commissioned with a broad remit then:

- the ESRC should further strengthen the role of the Centre, and particularly the Hub, in relation to its coordination and intellectual leadership of the field. Its leadership role should include but not be limited to
 - maintaining an up to date knowledge of the strengths and development needs of research methods and research methods training in the social sciences across the UK and internationally
 - further exploring the complexities, both philosophical and practical of inter and multi-disciplinary work

- promoting pedagogical innovation in the teaching of research methods.

If the NCRM is re-commissioned with a narrower role, for example focussing primarily on methodological development and advanced training then:

- the ESRC should clarify its remit and its links with other forms of research methods training and capacity development.