

Evaluation of the ESRC/FCO/AHRC New Security Challenges: Radicalisation and Violence - A Critical Assessment Initiative

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Executive summary

Background

The New Security Challenges: Radicalisation and Violence (NSCRV) Programme represented a concentrated investment into research on the causes of radicalisation and political violence. The Programme originated in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO)'s realisation that radicalisation and political violence were critical issues, but that policy was insufficiently informed by robust evidence. An initial effort to solicit interest from the research community was met with unexpected hostility and required a redrafting of the Programme Specification. The legacy of that 'false start' and further issues led to the FCO's progressive disengagement from the NSCRV initiative.

The Programme received almost **£2.5 million in funding** (£1.7 million from the Economic and Social Research Council, £400,000 from the Arts and Humanities Research Council, £400,000 from the FCO). A total of **9 projects** involving participation of **25 investigators and researchers** were funded to run between July 2007 and December 2009 (some projects were eventually extended until July 2010). Two of the projects, run by Independent Research Organisations (IROs), encountered difficulties requiring intervention from the Programme Director, as well as budget reallocation.

Evaluation methodology

The Evaluation methodology included analysis of a wide variety of documents, notably minutes of commissioning meetings, successful award applications, End of Award Reports, Rapporteur Reports, the Programme Director's Final Report, and a number of research outputs. Interviews were carried out with key personnel, including the Programme Director, the Chair of the Advisory Board, representatives of the Foreign & Commonwealth Office and Principal Investigators (PIs) for seven of the nine Projects. A questionnaire designed to assess non-academic Impact was distributed to known participants in the Programme's Impact activities.

Aims and objectives

- The funded projects produced high-quality research, some graded as outstanding or very good by reviewers. By 2011, they had produced 3 books, 2 journal special issues, and more than 40 peer-reviewed journal articles. Evidence of academic fecundity is also to be found in the various initiatives which followed Projects' completion.
- Critical engagement with the term 'radicalisation' resulted in considerable deliberation over the definition, yet few, if any, operational definitions were put forward. Some end-users expressed impatience with this conceptual treatment, while several Projects actively sought to influence or challenge uses of the term in the political discourse.

- Overall, the Programme engaged well with local and global perspectives. The projects covered a wide range of geographical areas, though the absence of projects on the Middle East left an obvious research gap. Still, it is not clear that the rather narrow range of methodological approaches enabled a rigorous approach to modeling the global dimensions of radicalisation.
- Engagement with the key themes identified in the Programme Specification was generally achieved, notably in terms of exploring the relationship between Islamism and violence. With some exceptions, the Programme was somewhat lacking in terms of transferability of findings across regions.
- It is not clear to what extent the Programme contributed to capacity building and the forging of lasting international ties. Investigators were largely UK-based. The opportunity to involve visiting international fellows was not taken up. A British research base may be to some extent responsible for issues of ‘methodological capture’.
- There is considerable evidence of engagement with end-users, though none suggesting the level of impact hoped for at the start. There is no evidence that findings were disseminated through the FCO, and some PIs remain unaware that the FCO joined the venture with any specific questions in mind.

Programme management

The Programme Director, Professor Stuart Croft, was generally commended for his continual support of the academic aspects of the Programme. A more modest range of benefits was associated with the involvement of the Advisory Board. It is perhaps premature to offer a final evaluation of the Programme’s management, given that it is still too early to wholly appreciate the Programme’s Impact. Nonetheless, it is suggested that a higher initial investment in the Directorship could have ensured a more consistent focus upon the development of Impact opportunities. Despite the Director’s best efforts, there wasn’t a sense that the Programme had a clear identity, nor a cohesive outcome.

Impact and legacy

The Projects produced an impressive array of academic outputs. The Programme Director designed and supported 16 distinct activities to facilitate Impact within non-academic (end-user and public) communities. Collectively, a great deal was done to disseminate findings beyond academe. Nevertheless, it was not possible to identify specific policy impact from the NSCRV Programme as a whole or from individual Projects. The FCO hoped for research that would impact directly on policy decisions and were disappointed in the outcome. For the Programme Director, any explanation of the limited short-term impact should acknowledge that many investigators took positions at odds with those held by the Government.

Potential research priorities

A number of areas can be identified for development, congruent with the Strategic Funding Priorities outlined in ESRC’s 2011-2015 Delivery Plan.

- Greater efforts should be made to **engage the full range of social sciences** that speak to policy issues in this domain, in order to avoid the pitfalls of ‘disciplinary capture.’
- Research more concerned with **general processes** of radicalisation (of which Islamic radicalisation is an example) may be more able to put into question received wisdom and

produce findings applicable in a variety of contexts and across a range of emergent problems.

- A programme of **jointly funded projects involving the EPSRC as well as the ESRC** could build multidisciplinary capacity capable of producing research under the “Influencing Behaviour and Informing Prevention” heading.
- Considerable advances have been achieved in the application of **complexity theory and science, network analysis, and agent-based modelling** to explain the outbreak of challenges to government. In light of the ‘Arab Spring’, support for these approaches could address an extant research gap.
- Work on the role of re-designed public spaces, agent intervention strategies, and public **responses to counter-terrorism policies**, in particular, could be fruitful avenues for further investigation.

Conclusions and recommendations

- **Several of the eventual Programme’s objectives were met.** Taken together, the projects delivered a wealth of high quality research outputs. A number of projects attracted follow-on, non-ESRC funding.
- However, **the Programme fell short of its stated aims**, as far as international research capacity building, research gaps (on the Middle-East), and non-academic impact are concerned. The questions which drove the FCO’s involvement were not answered and policy impact, at least in the UK, was negligible.
- The Programme’s **shortcomings may be, in part, traced back to the Programme’s controversial genesis.** Among some policy-makers, the perception remains that engaging with ESRC is unlikely to deliver actionable research.
- The call failed to attract interest from fields of study beyond the ‘usual suspects,’ resulting in an unduly **narrow disciplinary and methodological focus.** It is notable that those Projects from disciplines less traditionally associated with radicalisation studies left the most lasting impression.
- The circumstances of **Independent Research Organisations** are significantly different from those of universities, which is associated with a range of problems and puts into question their successful involvement in this kind of programme.

The original NSCRV specification explicitly stated that, “This initiative seeks to generate new knowledge in a short time-frame.” Whilst a commendable aspiration, it might not have been a realistic one. **In any future jointly conceived and funded programmes, it would be helpful if each party was clear about its interests and about which could realistically be met.**

Recommendations for the ESRC to consider, following from this evaluation are that:

- If the ESRC wishes to fund policy-oriented research, it should **consider commissioning specific projects from those known to be capable of delivering strong results in a limited timescale**, rather than soliciting open bids. It might also prove valuable to encourage greater interaction between stakeholders and researchers, through ‘sandpit-style’ activities.
- The ESRC might also **consider adapting its commissioning process to the demands of reactive, time-sensitive, action-oriented research.** A short-listing exercise based on a broad first call might be followed by a so-called ‘Idea Factory,’ during which interested

academics and stakeholders could formulate research priorities, set out programme specifications, and take the measure of one another.

- **Realistic rather than idealistic time scales might more usefully be set.** In the case of this programme, the very short (six week) time scale for the preparation of bids may have led to fewer, less multidisciplinary and less innovative bids.
- If future calls are to be opened to IROs, the **development of distinct conditions and arrangements for their awards** should be considered.
- Given Strategic Funding Priorities, future research calls in this area should aim to **widen the disciplinary and methodological base from which bids are sought.**