

Evaluation of the research group on lifestyles, values and the environment

Executive summary

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In 2005, ESRC commissioned the Research Group on Lifestyles, Values and the Environment (RESOLVE) as one of three Energy Research Groups under the RCUK's Energy Research Programme. According to the Research Group, its overall aim was to develop an extended programme of research exploring the relationship between lifestyles, values and energy consumption; and to use this research to inform policy-makers in the UK who are seeking to encourage sustainable energy consumption patterns.

RESOLVE's funding ran from 1 May 2006 - 30 November 2011 to the value of £2,760,838. Alongside the Director (Jackson) there were seven Co-Investigators from the Centre for Environmental Strategy, Economics, Psychology and Sociology. The Research Group employed 15 Researchers (with varying length of service) and had seven associated PhD students. All were based at the University of Surrey.

In May 2012, the ESRC commissioned Graham Smith, Professor of Politics at the University of Southampton, to undertake an evaluation of RESOLVE. The conclusions and recommendations in this report draw on his own knowledge of and expertise in this area of research in addition to archival analysis of RESOLVE and ESRC documentation, semi-structured interviews with members of the Research Group Advisory Group, senior University of Surrey managers and non-academic research users, independent peer reviews of nominated research outputs, and an online survey of academics and non-academics familiar with the Research Group.

RESOLVE has undertaken a substantial programme of work, establishing itself as a leader in its field of research. The Research Group has played an agenda-setting role in understanding sustainable lifestyles and behaviours and has achieved a high profile amongst the academic community as well as amongst research users in the public, private and third sectors.

Although the objectives specified by the Research Group were rather general in nature, the Evaluation concludes that RESOLVE made contributions to knowledge and understanding in all the areas identified. Analysis of the conceptual framework of RESOLVE and its work programme set out at the beginning of the investment suggests that some areas of its research programme were more developed than others. This is probably to be expected in such a large investment. Nonetheless, the overall research programme is somewhat disparate, lacking clear linkages between many projects. This is at least implicitly recognised in the professorial fellowship recently awarded to Jackson which aims to 'synthesise and interpret' the 'enormous body of research' carried out by RESOLVE.

Independent peer review of nominated outputs from the Research Group indicates that some of its research was innovative and path-breaking, particularly in the field of energy lifestyle mapping. The book *Prosperity Without Growth*, published by the Director during the lifetime of the project, is one of the most high profile UK social science publications of recent years.

The Research Group failed to deliver a major component of its research programme: the longitudinal study. This was due to a combination of both intellectual and management difficulties. While there was agreement with the ESRC on replacement projects, there was disappointment amongst the Research Group that this core element of the programme had to be abandoned: it was a significant loss to RESOLVE and to the broader research community. To their credit, a follow-up investment – the Sustainable Lifestyles Research Group (SLRG) involving a number of the same investigators – learnt lessons from this experience and has embedded a similar longitudinal study within its programme of research.

The ethos and structure of the Research Group promoted interdisciplinary exchange amongst Group members (although this was primarily within the social sciences). There is evidence of collaborations and research agendas that might not have developed without the interaction between disciplines enabled by RESOLVE. While enhancing interdisciplinary capacity, familiar tensions emerged for early career researchers and PhD students about their connection with ‘home’ disciplines and future career opportunities.

There is evidence from interviews and documentation (including a previous report commissioned by the ESRC by CAG Consultants) that RESOLVE has had significant impact, in particular at a conceptual level in the development of public and policy debate on sustainable living. The Research Group did not implement a strategic Communications Plan, but rather adopted a more ‘organic’ approach to collaboration. While this was effective in delivering meaningful impact on the organisations with which RESOLVE engaged directly, the signposting and visibility of its work for a wider audience could have been more effectively implemented. Policy officials expressed the view that RESOLVE could have had greater policy influence with a more focused strategy, although they recognised the tensions that closer working with government could have generated. Their support for RESOLVE’s research agenda led DEFRA to majority-fund the follow-up investment SLRG, again directed by Jackson.

Commentators within and outside RESOLVE highlight the impressive intellectual leadership of Jackson in the success of its academic and user impact. However, there were weaknesses in the management of the group which were exacerbated with the increasing demands on Jackson’s time as his profile increased. In hindsight it is clear that such a large and complicated investment would have benefitted from an experienced Centre Manager (another lesson which has informed the design of SLRG). The ESRC did not respond positively to a request from RESOLVE for additional funds to fill this management gap.

RESOLVE has played a significant role in opening up the research agenda on sustainable living and practice/behaviour change. This research field needs further support in at least three directions:

- synthesising existing research and networking research groups;

- continued lobbying and collaboration on the part of ESRC to embed relevant social science research within programmes led by other Research Councils; and
- further funding of interdisciplinary research on understanding the conditions for the emergence and sustenance of sustainable practices.

ESRC also needs to consider the way in which the management capacities of large investments are evaluated in the commissioning process; the development of a contingency fund to support investments when the demands on Investigators from external agencies exceed reasonable expectations; and consideration of how the interdisciplinary agenda of RCUK affects the future opportunities for early career researchers and postgraduates.