Understanding Populations Trends and Processes Programme

Dr David Owen
University of Warwick

Executive Summary

Background information on the investment/funding scheme

The ESRC Research Resources Board’s “Understanding Population Processes and Trends” (UPTAP) Initiative ran for four years from October 2005. It was an innovative approach to allocating £3.1 million of research funding, with an explicit focus on building capacity in secondary data analysis, rather than pursuing a defined academic research agenda. There were two rounds of project funding. The first round invited proposals from the full range of population-relevant research, while the second round was concerned with the study of “ethnicity”. There were also two rounds of funding for “User Fellowships”. In total, 43 projects and Fellowships were funded, with 4 rated ‘outstanding’ and 21 ‘good’ out of 26 assessed by the end of September 2010.

Brief Summary of evaluation methodology used

The evaluation was conducted over the period from August 2010 to January 2011. The evaluation involved:

- reviewing documentation concerned with the Initiative, including the applications, referees comments, End-of-Award reports and reviews of the latter for each project and Fellowship
- an overview of the outputs produced by Initiative-funded activities
- a survey of researchers involved in the Initiative
- a survey of User Fellows and their academic awards holders
- Semi-structured interviews with key individuals involved in running the Initiative; and semi-structured interviews with academics, non-academics active in the research areas addressed by the Initiative and others in the potential ‘user’ community.

An overview of the extent to which the aims and objectives of the investment/scheme were met

The UPTAP Initiative had four principal objectives:

- to build capacity in secondary analysis amongst new and mid-career researchers
- to spread knowledge and use of secondary analysis through the social science community
- to add value to the ESRC investments in the collection, preservation and promotion of large-scale national data sets, by encouraging their use and exploitation
- in the longer term, to maximise the knowledge gained about economic and social change from secondary data analysis.
The Initiative certainly achieved the first of these objectives. It placed considerable emphasis on training and development of skills, and this formed a major part of most project applications. It predominantly funded researchers who were in the early and mid stages of their academic careers. Most researchers who responded to the survey felt that they had benefited greatly from the capacity-building activities they engaged in and developed new skills and knowledge. However, relatively few of those involved were previously qualitative researchers; rather, most had a relatively strong base of quantitative skills.

The second objective was rather ambitious for a relatively small and time-limited funding initiative which addressed a specific field of quantitative research. The interviews conducted for this evaluation revealed a perception that the Initiative has not produced a major step forward in knowledge of secondary data analysis across the social science community. The reason for this seems to be that results are being published within a much larger body of research already focusing on secondary data analysis with these data sets and therefore their academic impact is relatively limited thus far.

The third objective was broadly achieved. It is clear that the Initiative has resulted in a large amount of research being undertaken which made use of the data sets in which the ESRC has invested. Many of the projects funded have also linked these data sets with other data sets collected by the Office for National Statistics, thereby adding value to these investments. A number of new data sets were generated which will prove invaluable to other researchers.

The fourth is probably the hardest of the Objectives to evaluate, since it is not long since the Initiative ended and the results of the research undertaken are still in the process of being published. There was also a tension between ‘learning new skills’ and ‘making substantive advances on particular research topics’. Nevertheless, the research has certainly added to the sum of knowledge about population-related topics and advances have been made in particular areas. The most obvious impact upon academic knowledge has been in the area of population change between 1991 and 2001, particularly with respect to ethnicity.

**Academic quality and achievements (including strengths and weaknesses)**

From the outset, it was recognised that the aim of promoting capacity development through training young and mid career researchers in secondary data analysis and gaining experience in managing research projects had higher priority than the advancement of academic knowledge or methodological development. Nevertheless, the great majority of the projects funded by the Initiative were evaluated as being “good”, with four rated “outstanding”. The Initiative resulted in a large volume of publications, conference presentations and other related activity. Much of this activity occurred following the end of the funding period and hence the Initiative has had an ongoing effect in terms of research findings continuing to appear in the academic literature. The majority of the articles resulting from UPTAP-funded research appeared in high quality academic journals. While the consensus of opinion of those consulted was that the research funded by the Initiative was largely solid and concerned with data generation and analysis, there were also a few highlights in terms of methodological development and innovatory ways of analysing data. The Initiative has resulted in the creation of many new data sets which will be valuable for other research projects and hence the aim of enhancing the use of data in which the ESRC has invested and ‘adding value’ to it has been substantially achieved.
Non-academic impact and engagement (including strengths and weaknesses)

Disseminating the findings of research conducted within the Initiative to the wider world (particularly to researchers in the various branches of central and local government) was an explicit aim of the Initiative. A great deal of effort was devoted to this, and it proved very successful with some non-academic organisations (eg local authorities in London). However, the penetration of the Initiative into the non-academic world was rather uneven. Outside academia, awareness of the research findings produced by the Initiative probably remained largely within the realm of active researchers and the impact at the level of policy-makers was limited, albeit with some important exceptions While further work on dissemination would be necessary to improve awareness of the Initiative, it is undoubtedly the case that many researchers involved in the Initiative were introduced to a new audience for their work and acquired some of the skills necessary to improve dissemination in their future work.

Capacity building activities undertaken

Capacity building was a major aim of the Initiative and a substantial number of activities intended to lead to capacity building were undertaken by researchers funded by the initiative. Most of the researchers participated in a number of training courses and some undertook short-term research visits (some abroad) in centres of excellence in population-related research and quantitative data analysis. Capacity was also built via UPTAP Media and Communication training workshops and through attending and participating in UPTAP sessions at two ESRC Research Methods Festivals. Researchers also gained experience in writing for different audiences through the “Findings” aimed at policy-makers and the lay reader and through assisting with editing the UPTAP book series. Most researchers who responded to the survey reported that they had found the training and capacity-building elements of the Initiative of great benefit to them.

Management of the investment/funding scheme

The Initiative was managed by a Co-ordinator and an Advisory Committee. The Co-ordinator was responsible for bringing disparate research projects together to share experience and publish results in a collective manner, in order to maximise their impact. The Advisory Committee was involved in the selection of User Fellowships and had an overview of the selection of projects to be funded by the Commissioning Panel from 2006 onwards. The Co-ordinator worked as part of a ‘troika’ with officers from the ESRC and representatives of the Research Resources Board to monitor the administration of the Initiative. The consensus of those consulted via the surveys and interviews was that the Co-ordinator had been extremely energetic, enthusiastic and committed to the Initiative. He had worked hard to support and nurture individual projects, maximise the synergies between the individual projects funded under the Initiative (e.g. through workshops, conferences and other networking activities) and to maximise the dissemination of research results and their impact. However, the Co-ordinator’s task was made more difficult by the lack of an induction process to his role as Initiative Co-ordinator and problems in liaising with the ESRC administration, resulting first from staff illness and then rapid turnover of staff in the ESRC office. The inflexibility of ESRC administrative procedures also served to undermine, to some extent, the success of innovations like the User Fellowships. Also, the Co-ordinator was not helped by lack of continuity in his administrative support at the University of Leeds.
Future priorities and areas for development

A number of those surveyed and interviewed lamented the ending of the Initiative and urged the ESRC to continue funding in this area. Others expressed the view that supporting the secondary analysis of data sets in which the ESRC had invested its funds should be an ongoing activity rather than the subject of a time-limited Initiative. The Co-ordinator made two suggestions for future research funding: a further round of research projects concerned with local demography linked to the 2011 Census and administrative data sources; and an ‘UPTAP for Europe’ in which the approach adopted by UPTAP was extended to study demographic processes across the continent of Europe. The former is a natural extension of the work carried out by many of the researchers involved in the Initiative. The latter would be extremely worthwhile and facilitating links with continental European researchers in the field of demography would certainly be beneficial to the UK academic community. However, this would require collaboration and coordination with other European funding bodies and it may be difficult to reconcile all national priorities. The Coalition government’s recent announcement that the 2011 Census may be the last in the current form also provides a possible theme for a future research Initiative exploring the potential of administrative data sets for producing the kind of data collected by the Census. Other potential areas would include ways of generating Census-type data on an ongoing basis. Since the major data sets such as the Integrated Household Survey (and its component surveys) are collected on an ongoing basis, there may also be argument for regular updating and extension of the type of research undertaken by UPTAP’s projects in order to identify emerging demographic and socio-economic trends. The ending of the funding of small grants and rationing of grant applications by ESRC makes it more important that future Initiatives like UPTAP with a mixture of types and sizes of grant are maintained, in order to give less experienced and contract researchers the opportunity to obtain research grants.

Conclusions and recommendations

Overall, the Initiative achieved most of its objectives. It represented an innovative approach to research funding and was warmly received and endorsed by those involved in it. It yielded a great deal of activity and has resulted in significant academic achievements, in spite of the tension between capacity building and the creation of substantive new knowledge, which remained throughout the course of the Initiative. Though priority was given to capacity building, the number of research projects evaluated as being ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’ grades is testament to the quality of what has been achieved.

The success of the Initiative has been in large part due to the energy and commitment demonstrated by the Co-ordinator in nurturing individual projects and building a supportive network in which experiences and results from ongoing research could be shared. It has provided researchers involved in the Initiative with an opportunity to extend their skills and expertise in the application of quantitative methods to large data sets.

On balance, the least successful aspects of the Initiative were its efforts to involve non-academic ‘users’ in research (despite some high quality User Fellowships) and in extending analytical expertise with the data sets in which the ESRC has invested beyond the academic community. The funding model used by the ESRC proved to be problematical for non-academic organisations and this limited the success of the User Fellowships.
The Initiative suffered from a lack of administrative support from the ESRC for the Co-ordinator and from the inflexibility of ESRC administrative procedures. For any future Initiative of this type, administrative support both from the ESRC office and from the Co-ordinator’s host institution should be greatly improved. The Co-ordinator and Advisory Committee should also be appointed at the outset. The grant application process should be revised to better support innovations like User Fellowships.

**Recommendations**

In any future initiatives where there are tensions between capacity building and undertaking cutting edge academic research it would be helpful for ESRC to establish greater clarity about the balance desired between such potentially conflicting objectives.

In future it would be advantageous to recruit and appoint an Initiative Co-ordinator and Advisory Committee before commissioning of the first round of projects.

For ESRC to maximise their investments to have an induction process for new Co-ordinators at the outset so that they are clear about processes and protocols, especially regarding their own responsibilities and those of ESRC.

To pay greater attention to ensuring that, as far as possible, greater administrative resilience is built in to support arrangements for Co-ordinators - at both ESRC and at the host institution.

To take heed of the logistical issues in advertising 'less conventional' types of awards (notably User Fellowships) - allowing longer 'lead' times and also ensuring that supporting documentation does not assume undue knowledge of ESRC procedures.

To consider adjusting the standard End of Award Evaluation criteria for User Fellowships, to take account of their specific objectives.

Taking into account the recommendations above, to fund further Initiatives which provide the opportunity for less experienced researchers to gain experience in obtaining research funding and develop capacity in secondary data analysis.