Review of the ESRC Doctoral Training Centres Network

Review undertaken by a Panel chaired by Mr Richard Bartholomew
January 2015

Other panel members:
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Executive Summary

The aims of the review were to assess the extent to which the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Doctoral Training Centre (DTC) network, launched in 2011-2012, is meeting its core objectives. The full terms of reference are at Annex 1. The findings and recommendations will inform the design of the next round of network commissioning, and the call specification.

The DTC network has only been in existence for a short time. It is too early to be able to draw very robust conclusions about its overall impact. Metrics need to be agreed to assess its longer term impact and the success of each DTC. DTCs are, however, making good progress in improving the quality and flexibility of training, fostering greater interdisciplinarity and building a strong sense of a national cohort of highly-skilled and motivated social science researchers. They are using the new flexibilities in funding in innovative ways. The leveraging in of co-funding, primarily from the DTC institutions themselves, has been a significant achievement, increasing significantly the total number of students benefiting from ESRC awards.

There remain significant issues still to address. The Advanced Training network is not yet working as intended. More needs to be done to foster collaborations with non-academic partners and especially the private sector. The boundaries created between those universities who are part of the DTC network and those who are not, are currently too impermeable, limiting the wider diffusion of the many positive benefits of the initiative.

Improving training and increasing flexibility

The new DTC Network is equipping cohorts of social science postgraduates with excellent research and other key skills which will enable them to have an impact on the key economic and social questions. It is beginning to have a significant effect on developing interdisciplinary training and the sharing of different types of expertise. Student-led activities, especially the national first year and final year conferences, are helping to build a strong sense of being part of a national cohort of new social scientists.

Advanced Training

The Advanced Training network has so far failed to take off as a national and regional resource. There is much confusion about NCRM’s role as a clearing house for such courses and some dissatisfaction was expressed with its website. There are also unresolved questions of effective demand and supply which DTCs and non-DTCs should explore further. There needs to be more collaboration between DTCs and non-DTCs in each region to ensure that institutions are able to achieve a better match of demand and supply. Virtual learning approaches should be more widely used across the DTC network than at present to improve access to Advanced Training.

Collaborations with non-academic partners

Steady progress has been made in developing collaborations with non-academic partners and there has been a substantial increase in these overall. However, the number of private sector collaborations has been falling. Overall 22 per cent of studentships involve non-academic collaborations but only three per cent have collaborations with private sector
organisations. ESRC and the DTC network should explore whether a specific and well branded programme to develop more collaborations would help to reverse this decline.

**International partnerships**

It is too early to comprehensively assess the overall success and impact of the new International PhD partnering pilot. DTCs have developed partnerships with 64 universities and research institutes in 27 countries. The scheme has made good progress in developing reciprocal international institutional collaborations and supporting the development of an international cohort of early career researchers.

**National Benchmarks and Priority Areas**

The introduction of DTCs and the new flexibilities in funding have enabled a significant increase in the total number of postgraduates benefiting from ESRC awards – a 19 per cent increase in the last three years. This is an important achievement. Most disciplines have shared in this increase. However, the creation of the DTC Network and the identification of national benchmarks has had no effect on the shortage disciplines of Education, Social Anthropology or Social Work. The position for the key priority areas of Economics, Advanced Quantitative Methods, Management and Business Studies, Language Based Area Studies and Interdisciplinary Studies is much more encouraging.

Tackling the shortfall in numbers of ESRC-funded places for the disciplines experiencing decline or nil growth in awards requires a variety of strategies. We welcome the fact that ESRC will soon be updating its demographic review to explore the issue. We favour retaining steers on shortage disciplines as well as national benchmarks but as much, or more, is likely to be achieved through offering greater flexibility in rules and requirements around studentships and ensuring courses are better adapted to the needs of ‘non-standard’ students and mid-career entrants who have competing family pressures.

**Types of award: 1+3 and +3 models**

There is concern about the implications for widening access and participation of the fall in the number and proportion of 1+3 awards. The proportion of 1+3 awards has fallen to less than a third and +3s have increased. We recommend that the Training and Skills Committee should review how effective the current monitoring strategy is compared with a more directive approach using explicit targets and/or ring-fenced funding allocations for 1+3 awards. The 1+3 awards should be restored to the two-fifths level seen in 2011-12, with the aim of moving back to the 50 per cent level seen in earlier years.

**Awarding studentships**

Different DTCs have very different approaches to allocating studentships. Some have a completely open competition with no pre-determined quotas. Others hold an open competition for a proportion of the studentships but have pre-set minimum quotas for individual pathways and/or member institutions. Both approaches have their merits and their advocates. We recommend that the right balance between open competitions and the use of quotas should be for the DTCs themselves to decide. The key consideration should always be recognising and rewarding excellence.
Common deadlines for applications and decisions on studentships

There is a virtually unanimous view that there should be a uniform closing date for applications and decision dates for studentship awards across the DTC network. We fully support this view and recommend that the DTC Directors, in consultation with the ESRC, should agree a common deadline.

Structures and funding

The concentration of ESRC’s postgraduate research funding into 21 DTCs was an understandable response to developing excellence and achieving the necessary critical mass in the face of significant overall reductions in the Council's budget. Strong representations have, however, been made that the new structure ignores or undervalues the smaller ‘pockets of excellence’ which are to be found in institutions outside the DTC network. Others dispute this argument and feel that is over-stated.

Whatever the true extent and quality of such centres of excellence, where they exist, especially where indicated in the results of the Research Excellence Framework (REF), we recommend that they should be included in future DTC commissioning processes as part of consortia bids. DTCs should be encouraged to collaborate on delivering pathways provided jointly by departments or units both inside and outside the DTC where high quality training and expertise on a specific topic is found beyond the DTC itself.

DTCs and Centres for Doctoral Training

Centres for Doctoral Training (CDTs) offer a feasible approach for addressing interdisciplinary issues both within and across councils but introducing this model now would inevitably have a significant effect on the funding available for existing DTCs. We do not believe it would be right to try to introduce CDTs in addition to the existing DTCs unless additional funding becomes available, but ESRC should explore co-funding options with the other research councils. Greater interdisciplinarity is also achievable within the existing DTC approach.

Consortia or single institution DTCs?

It is too early to conclude that consortia DTCs as such are necessarily the optimal model, though some single institution DTCs may be too small to provide the critical mass of training and opportunities required or to create a strong student cohort effect. We do not favour a move to exclusively consortia DTCs in the next round of commissioning – the key question should be whether a proposed DTC will be able to provide the range and quality of training experiences required, not its organisational composition.

Recommissioning

For reasons of fairness and to ensure continuing high quality, the commissioning process for the next round must be fully open to all institutions and fully transparent. In preparation for the next commissioning round we recommend that ESRC should hold workshops for potential bidders to give them a greater awareness of what is involved in setting up and running a DTC, especially a consortium, and some of the lessons learnt from the first round. A key ingredient for the success of a DTC is having strong, strategic and properly resourced leadership. Bidders in the recommissioning round should be required to provide clear and costed proposals on how the DTC will be managed, especially the provision made for a
Director post. The adequacy of these proposals should have a significant bearing on whether an application is approved.

**Networking**

We recommend that wider networking between DTCs both regionally and nationally should be fostered in order to share best practice and find solutions to emerging issues.

**ESRC Recognition**

The ending of the process of ESRC recognition for social science departments reaching a high standard of quality is much regretted by those institutions which have no ESRC studentships. It has been argued that this ‘kite-mark’ helped them attract other types of research funding as well as high quality students. However, given the constraints on ESRC’s budget, we accept that providing a universal recognition exercise can no longer be a priority.

**Reducing bureaucracy**

We recommend that ESRC, in consultation with DTC Directors and administrators, undertakes a light touch review of its own administrative processes to ensure that it really is minimising the number of instances where DTCs have to seek ESRC approval or endorsement for decisions which are best made by DTCs themselves.

**Evaluating impact and success**

We recommend that an explicit set of output and outcome criteria is agreed by ESRC with the DTC Network to ensure that all parties, including institutions which are not yet part of a DTC, are clear on how success is being assessed, using quantifiable measures wherever possible. These should be put in place before the next commissioning round.
Introduction

In spring 2009, after a year of review and consultation, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) introduced a new Postgraduate Training Framework. Its Postgraduate Training and Development Guidelines set out plans for a new national postgraduate training network. These plans were subsequently amended in 2010 following the outcome of the Comprehensive Spending Review.

The main objective of the new Framework is to raise standards of postgraduate training across the social science research base, delivered through the creation of a national doctoral training network of individual institutions and consortia. This moves ESRC away from the previous system of accrediting individual training courses and outlets at an institutional level. The Framework is focused on the principles of excellence, flexibility, collaboration and interdisciplinarity.

Excellence - The Framework reflects the ESRC’s commitment to excellence in training that will enable the UK to support and develop world-class researchers across the social science research base. The emphasis throughout the commissioning process has been on quality, accreditation being awarded to those able to demonstrate the ability to deliver the very best postgraduate training in social science disciplines and/or areas of interdisciplinary enquiry within a strong research environment which can support a critical mass of postgraduate students.

Flexibility - The Framework promotes flexibility in the content, structure and delivery of training as well as in the use of studentship funding. This flexibility is designed to allow institutions to be more innovative in the training they offer and to be more responsive to student needs across the diverse disciplinary base, as well as in the use of their allocation.

Collaboration - The Framework encourages collaboration where appropriate and practicable in order to pool expertise, build critical mass and reduce duplication by encouraging a more integrated approach to training. This includes collaboration between institutions in the delivery of training, and between private, public and third sector organisations to help maximise the wider impact of the ESRC’s training investments and to increase opportunities for doctoral students to work with external stakeholders.

Interdisciplinarity - The Framework facilitates greater interdisciplinarity through more flexible approaches to the design of training allowing for more innovative training provision, particularly focused on the seven ESRC Strategic Challenges.

In order to achieve these principles the network is intended to:

- promote the development of more coherent institution and consortium-wide core training programmes
- deliver truly excellent postgraduate training across a significant range of social science disciplines and areas of interdisciplinary enquiry
- move towards more flexible platforms, through the formation of training pathways and the allocation of a range of training routes for postgraduate students.
ESRC’s aim is to establish a national training infrastructure that brings together both the range of training offered by the new DTCs as well as that provided through other ESRC investments such as the National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM) and the Researcher Development Initiative. In line with a key objective of the Framework, the aim is for as many students as possible from all institutions to have access to a wider range of advanced training and development opportunities.

The Framework was conceived in a very different fiscal and policy climate to the one that emerged when the network was being commissioned, coinciding with a 12 per cent real terms decrease in the ESRC budget following the 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review. This resulted in a drop in the annual studentship allocation from around 750 to 600 awards. The reduction in funding led to a much more targeted network than originally envisaged. Specifically, the associated raising of the assessment threshold during the 2009-2010 commissioning process resulted in no Doctoral Training Unit (DTUs – smaller units eligible to hold studentships, but with no annual allocation) applications being accredited.

The policy context has also evolved with the recent Smith Review1 of postgraduate training calling for a much more targeted approach to postgraduate provision, focused more on centres of research excellence.

A network of 21 DTCs emerged from the commissioning process, which includes a total of 46 different Research Organisations. From October 2011, all ESRC postgraduate training support has been delivered exclusively via the DTC network. All studentship application processes and management of individual studentships are devolved to individual DTCs. Each DTC is allocated funds for a set number of studentships per year, and these can be supplemented by the DTC through co-funding or additional support from the research organisation(s) involved (providing at least 50 per cent of each studentship’s cost is funded by ESRC).

The current network of DTCs runs until 2017. Following this evaluation, the network will be re-commissioned in 2016.

In their study of the setting up and early experience of the DTCs Lunt et al argue that ESRC’s move to the DTC model is part of a wider trend across the research councils, led by the Engineering and Physical Science Research Council (EPSRC), towards a much more active role in reshaping universities and reforming doctoral education to ensure that science and research is having greater impact on and engagement with the policy environment:

‘The EPSRC’s ‘achievements’ of selectivity and economies of scale through its funding model have been closely watched by the other councils. Each has responded differently to the challenge of reducing administrative costs and targeting funding. This convergence is trumpeted in the Research Councils UK (RCUK) Strategic Vision for 2011–2015 announcement that ‘several Councils have introduced, or are developing, Doctoral Training Centres or other approaches which deliver greater concentration of resources in centres of excellence’. This provided the context for

1 Professor Adrian Smith, One Step Beyond: Making the Most of Postgraduate Education, www.bis.gov.uk/one-step-beyond
the introduction by ESRC in 2011 of 21 DTCs, rather different in nature to those of EPSRC, to the social science community.

Evaluation

In autumn 2013 ESRC commissioned an independent review to assess how far the DTC Network model is meeting its intended objectives, to identify what is and what is not working well and to make recommendations which will inform the re-commissioning of the network in 2016. The full terms of reference for the review are attached at Annex 1.

The review has been undertaken by a committee of independent experts chaired by Richard Bartholomew, formerly Chief Research Officer at Department for Education, and now an independent research consultant. The full membership of the committee is at Annex 2.

The methodology for the review consisted of:

- Written evidence invited from DTCs, from all HEIs including those who do not have DTC status, all Learned Societies in the social sciences. Forty-seven written submissions were received.
- Oral evidence taken in a series of evidence sessions from representative samples of:
  - DTC Directors
  - Senior representatives from non-lead institutions in DTCs
  - Universities which do not have DTC status
  - Supervisors in DTCs
  - ESRC-funded postgraduate students in DTCs
- A series of telephone interviews was also conducted with a small sample of non-academic organisations involved in collaborations with DTCs.

The oral evidence sessions were conducted as group discussions. The groups were constructed using a purposive sampling approach to ensure, as far as possible, adequate coverage of consortia and single institution DTCs, DTCs of different sizes (ie numbers of ESRC-funded studentships), and coverage of different regions and UK countries. Non-DTC research organisations were selected on a similar basis but with care taken to include some HEIs who had applied for but not been successful in gaining DTC or DTU funding and a mixture of post- and pre-1992 universities. Whilst those invited to give evidence at the oral sessions were not a statistically representative sample they did represent a good cross-section of different interests and experiences.

The Chair, Vice-Chair and a former Vice-Chair of the ESRC Training and Skills Committee (TSC) were also interviewed as were senior ESRC officials.

In addition to written and oral evidence specifically obtained for the evaluation, the committee also reviewed monitoring data provided by the DTCs and ESRC, annual DTC reports and other relevant literature.

We would like to thank all of those who contributed to the review for the considerable time and thought they put into it, particularly those who agreed to take part in the oral evidence sessions.

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evidence sessions. However, the review report, its conclusions and recommendations represent the views of the review committee alone and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of those who provided oral or written evidence. Nor does the report necessarily reflect the views of the ESRC, the TSC, or the employing organisations of the individual committee members.

**Training quality, flexibility and collaboration**

**Improving training quality and increasing flexibility**

There is encouraging evidence that the new DTC Network is establishing a sound base for equipping cohorts of social science postgraduates with excellent research and other key skills which will enable them to have an impact on the key economic and social issues of the present and future. In particular, through encouraging greater cross-working within and between different institutions and disciplines it is beginning to have a significant effect on developing interdisciplinary training (primarily but not exclusively across the social sciences) and the sharing of different types of expertise. DTC Directors indicated that their DTCs had opened up training regionally and across institutions and there was a consensus that the overall quality of teaching and training had increased in recent years.

It is still early days. The first cohort of DTC students have not yet completed their studies. Direct attribution is also a problem. Many of these trends were present before the introduction of DTCs. But at this early stage there are many positive indications of the additional benefits that DTCs are fostering. Robust measurement of improvement is also a challenge. It is still much too early to assess change in outcomes and more needs to be done to establish some key metrics of improvement, but there is good qualitative evidence of positive developments in DTCs where they have seized the opportunities offered by the new, more devolved approach to funding research:

‘The advent of DTCs has enhanced the profile, status, management and development of postgraduate training, improving the quality of provision and the quality of students supported. The emphasis on increased flexibility in the training guidelines has encouraged innovation in training delivery, including the development of interdisciplinary pathways, the evolution of accredited research training over time in a managed institutional environment and novel ways of ensuring that students obtain core skills. Beyond capacity building in key disciplinary areas, we assess that students are receiving more comprehensive and balanced programmes of training, which are building capacity in terms of core research methods training, impact and knowledge exchange, which we consider as a very positive development resulting from the Network and one that should not be undervalued.’ North East DTC

‘The DTC network has brought together departments, disciplines and academic colleagues across and between institutions, fostering links that will have wider research benefits. DTCs are leading the development of good practice in graduate education and provision, which can then spread more widely to non-RCUK. The DTC model has enabled Oxford to transform its approach to doctoral training, promoting interdisciplinary opportunities and networking and bringing together its 18 training pathways.’ Oxford DTC
‘There have been noticeable shifts in student attitudes towards methodological openness, and the development of unusually interdisciplinary cohort effects. …A key strength of the network model is that it is spurring genuine interaction, and in turn innovations, between social science constituencies which might not otherwise communicate about their traditions, assumptions, or approaches. This is happening at different levels, all of them useful and to some degree playing off each other’. Warwick DTC Director

The study conducted by Lunt et al in 2012 with Directors of 20 of the 21 new DTCs found a similar picture of innovation:

‘A number of Directors claimed that they were using the opportunity afforded by the change to DTC status to increase interdisciplinarity, to share good practice across departments, or to enhance research methods training both at basic and advanced levels. Some had responded to the ESRC commissioning call by creating new pathways of interdisciplinary training. One DTC had framed the whole DTC round the theme of interdisciplinarity, taking the opportunity afforded by the DTC framework to ‘join up social scientists’ and ‘to break out of departments’.

The Scotland DTC provides an example of increasing interdisciplinarity within the new DTC structure:

‘The commitment of the Scottish Graduate School of Social Sciences (SGSSS) to cross-disciplinary working can be seen in the success the School had in being awarded additional ESRC multidisciplinary studentships in the African Studies and International Development pathway in early 2013. …In addition, and in part due to this success, SGSSS leveraged further funds from ESRC to support its various interdisciplinary activities… nine of the 24 SGSSS Pathways are already interdisciplinary (African Studies and International Development; Environment, Climate Change and Energy (ECCE); Families, Relationships and Demographic Change; Health; Language Sciences; Language Based Area Studies; Science, Technology and Innovation Studies; Social Care; Socio-legal Studies and Criminology) so interdisciplinarity was well embedded in the SGSSS from the outset.’

The views of supervisors working within DTCs were also very positive. They felt that the DTCs had brought about more of a sense of openness and sharing, and the increased sense of a network had given the opportunity to travel and meet colleagues. The supervisors reported that their roles are now more interesting and complex, but also more time consuming – for example, monitoring multiple communication streams; conducting training needs analysis; more co-supervising and time travelling for co-supervision meetings.

There was also good evidence that DTCs were exploiting the greater flexibility and autonomy that the new accountability and funding structure for DTCs encourages.

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4 Mid-Term Review of the Scottish Graduate School of Social Sciences for the Scottish Funding Council, March 2014, p2
'ESRC has done well to strike a balance between coordinating research provision and avoiding being overly centralised or prescriptive. Directors of both single-institution DTCs and consortia feel ESRC has supported them to allocate resources flexibly to suit their local circumstances, for example in administering discretionary funds from the international partnering scheme, using 3.5 year studentship funding to build three-month extension packages for +3 PhDs, making decisions about studentship allocation that take into account the student body as a whole, and governance and management arrangements that permit considerable autonomy within ESRC rules.' Academy of Social Sciences

‘… we have used the ESRC’s provision of 3.5 years funding per student to develop a wide range of additional three month extensions for ESRC-funded students (for publication, mixed methods training, supplementary foundation training, PGCAP etc). This means that we now offer not only 1+3 and +3, but also 3+.25 and 3+.5.’ Kings College London DTC

However, DTC Directors also felt that it was desirable to have even more flexibility in the future. In some instances DTCs may not yet be fully aware of the flexibilities which they have in fact been granted under the new approach to funding. This may result in unnecessary referrals to the ESRC.

**Improving student experience**

Student led activities, especially the national first year and final year conferences, are also a very encouraging development which is doing much to enhance the student experience, strengthen their commitment, promote a greater exchange of knowledge, and help build a strong sense of being part of a national cohort of new social scientists. One DTC commented that there was nothing like this in place before and the conferences were helping to build a community of postgraduates across the UK to network and receive advice and guidance.

Students reported that their DTCs and supervisors were supportive of wider networking activities, and in some cases, where the students were involved in organising events, the DTC had provided funding. One student who gave evidence was organising a student-led conference in his region and others wanted to learn from his experience. There was enthusiasm for more such conferences and activities to build an effective cohort and to support students who otherwise find that doing their PhD can be an isolating experience.

‘The Network seems to work very well at the set-piece joint events (notably the conferences), but the follow-up is more difficult. Certainly, from the point of view of this DTC, the overall approach is one which we think has been very beneficial for our students, giving them a real sense of belonging to a wider framework and making it easier to promote interdisciplinarity.’ Nottingham DTC

Corroboration for this comes from an ESRC survey of 994 students at all 21 DTCs. 47 per cent of these students said they were strongly encouraged and supported to attend additional training, conferences or other activities outside their DTC and a further 20 per cent said that they were sometimes encouraged to do this. Almost eight out ten said they

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5 994 students responded to the survey, a response rate of 53 per cent
were encouraged to organise their own activities. Seven in ten students (73 per cent) said that their DTC organised or supported them to organise networking activities within the DTC but only three in ten (29 per cent) said this applied to networking with external organisations.

**Advanced Training**

An important objective for the new DTCs is that they should lead the way in providing a national network for the Advanced Training of social science postgraduates, both for students within the DTC network and for those outside it including postgraduates in non-DTC universities. Although there is strong support for the concept of a national network the degree to which this is being achieved in practice is very uncertain.

‘The promised national advanced training network has not materialised and progress towards it is slow. In the absence of designated communication channels between DTCs and the National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM) or the Administrative Data Research Network (ADRN), Advanced Training Courses (ATCs) are developed in isolation, without clear consensus as to precisely what they should provide or to the differential remits of those provided by DTCs and NCRM. With little guidance from NCRM or ESRC, gaps are perceived in the quality of advanced training around the network’. Academy of Social Sciences (AcSS)

‘Open courses advertised on the NCRM website have seen limited uptake. This is widely attributed at least in part to difficulties navigating the website (despite small recent improvements to the search function). In addition the policy restricting each DTC to no more than five ATC offerings per year makes unrealistic assumptions about students’ willingness or ability...to travel to DTCs remote from their own to access relatively mainstream provision’. AcSS

There are a number of issues and problems which need to be urgently addressed:

- Firstly, DTCs and others are confused about the definition of Advanced Training and therefore whether the courses they are providing or seeking for their own students truly count as advanced. There is also a problem in that methods such as advanced statistical modelling, which would be seen as very advanced for some pathways or disciplines, are regarded as much more standard by other disciplines.

- Secondly, there is frequent confusion about the intended role of the National Centre for Research Methods as a national hub through which students and their supervisors can find suitable courses. Are all advanced courses intended to be advertised via the NCRM website? The ESRC advise that currently the NCRM’s formal role is that of giving DTCs access to the NCRM Training Portal so that they can add details of their courses, and adding DTCs as a searchable field within the Portal.

Considerable dissatisfaction was also reported with the accessibility and functionality of the NCRM website as a source of information on courses. Two non-DTC research organisations commented:
'The NCRM website is generally considered to be a very useful and a positive development. There is some uncertainty, however, on how it can be consulted most effectively relative to specific subject-matters. A clear and complete list of the programmes on offer, which is easily accessible, would be an improvement. University of East Anglia (UEA)

'The NCRM website that contains details of the DTC training courses is poor and difficult to search. Thus, marketing and accessibility of current DTC training materials (both non-advanced and advanced) is very poor, with training still associated with the national centres and not necessarily the DTCs. DTCs should be required to more actively collaborate with regional non-DTC HEIs to jointly provide a stronger programme for all social science students.' University of Portsmouth

DTC Directors reported that it is hard to understand the relationship between DTCs and the NCRM, and that students become overwhelmed with the variety of courses offered via the NCRM website. They did not feel that the NCRM portal was effective and some wondered if the most advanced courses were put on to it. They suggested that a single network or resource would be clearer, and remove unnecessary duplication. Supervisors in DTCs also had only limited awareness of NCRM and how it linked with the DTC network.

- Thirdly, although DTC Directors believed that non-ESRC postgraduates should be benefitting from the training in order to build a whole social science cohort, there was very mixed evidence of the extent to which postgraduates outside the DTC were in practice being informed about and then accessing advanced courses being provided by individual DTCs. There were related confusions about payment for these courses. One non-DTC institution commented that:

‘…not one of [our] research students has had the opportunity to participate in the Advanced Training operated by the DTC Network. … we carried out a brief assessment of the training opportunities being offered across the DTC Network. Of the twenty-one DTCs listed, it was clear from only five of their websites that their Advanced Training was available to any research student in economic and social science…; twelve DTCs gave the impression that their Advanced Training was only available to their own students; two DTCs made no reference to their Advanced Training (or indeed to any training at all)’. Anglia Ruskin University

Postgraduate research students at another non-DTC institution commented that:

‘it is unclear whether students at universities without a DTC could benefit from DTCs at other universities, suggesting that the marketing of the DTCs, and access to the provision, is not very efficient.’ City University London

DTC Directors themselves acknowledged that access to training for non-DTC students had proved difficult to achieve in practice and the network was not noticeably attracting many of these. Problems were thought to include communications, lack of sufficient interest and an absence of residential courses and/or two day courses for those living some distance away. However, even where there were few geographical barriers, take up by non-DTC students remained low.

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6 NCRM advise that the website can generate a complete list of all forthcoming courses.
The apparent failure of the Advanced Training network to take off as intended is due to a combination of different factors some of which are harder to address than others: lack of clarity on what advanced training really means and for whom, poor information flows including misunderstandings about who is eligible, some lack of effective demand from students and variations in supply. It was therefore reassuring to hear that the key players are aware of many of these problems and concerns and are actively seeking to address them. The Training and Skills Committee plans to develop a clearer definition of what constitutes advanced training. ESRC is currently in discussion with NCRM about the possibility of them taking on a formal co-ordination role. NCRM has undertaken a review to address the reported shortcomings of its website and new guidance has been issued. DTC Directors acknowledged this but there is more to be done. The DTC Director’s forum should also have a key role in ensuring that DTCs have a common understanding of the expectations for advanced training and the role of DTCs as training providers. The annual meetings between the vice-chair of the TSC and non-DTC institutions should be used to resolve and clarify the issues raised on access for non-DTC students.

There remain, however, questions of effective demand and supply which DTCs and non-DTCs should explore further. What are the underlying reasons for poor uptake? Are DTCs offering the right kinds of training content? Is enough being done to make courses accessible both geographically and to those students who have other access difficulties? For example, the Open University observed that at present:

‘Limited use is made of virtual learning environments to deliver innovative training across the network, and the potential for integrating on-line and face to face provision’.

There is also a need for more effective collaboration between DTCs and non DTCs in each region to ensure that institutions are able to achieve a better match of demand and supply for advanced training in their region as well as co-ordination between DTCs in the same region.

**Collaborations with the private, public and voluntary sectors**

A core objective for the DTCs is providing sufficient opportunities for students to be involved in collaborative research and training with the private, public and voluntary (or Third Sector) organisations. The benefits of such collaborations include increasing the impact of social science research on the key economic, social and environmental challenges; benefits to partners in giving them better access to the best and latest research knowledge; giving students practical experience of working in non-academic spheres and thereby increasing their wider employment skills; and, potentially, attracting co-funding for training.

‘Students get a huge amount out of working with private, public and third/voluntary sector organisations during their doctorate and are encouraged to take such opportunities. Schemes, such as the ESRC and DTC internships, provide important ways of encouraging this engagement and developing students’ skills and experience. At Oxford, we have a growing number of students doing internships.’ Oxford DTC

To encourage DTCs to develop such collaborations ESRC has set a target that at least 20 per cent of studentships per cohort should include a significant collaboration with a non-
academic partner in the public, private or third sector. These do not have to be co-funded but are expected to involve a substantive knowledge exchange rather than simply a one-way engagement such as data collection. ESRC’s monitoring statistics show that this target has been slightly exceeded in the last two years, representing a six to seven percentage point increase on 2011-12. However, within this total the absolute number (and proportion) of collaborations with the private sector has declined in the last three years whereas the number with the public sector has nearly doubled in that time. For the 2013-2014 cohort only 14 per cent of collaborations were with private sector organisations or, put another way, only three per cent of all the studentships (in this cohort) involved a private sector collaboration.

### Number of collaborations

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<td>140</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>percentage of allocation</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data for the former Collaborative Awards in Science and Engineering (CASE) programme between 2004 and 2010 shows that the private sector’s share of that form of collaboration averaged 20 per cent, though the actual number of private sector collaborations under CASE averaged just 12 per year. Direct comparisons between the former CASE programme and the new forms of collaboration undertaken by DTCs are problematic because the latter are broader in their scope and definition. For collaborations with DTCs the private sector share has averaged 21 per cent over the last three years, with an average of 25 studentships per year but falling from 31 in 2011-2012 to 18 in 2013-2014.

Bearing out these figures, DTC Directors said that it had been easier to establish Third Sector and government collaborations than ones with private businesses. The Third Sector has little money to offer whilst, for the private sector, the recession was felt to have reduced the number of business partners emerging. There is, of course, variation between different DTCs and different pathways. DTC Directors felt that some pathways lent themselves more to collaboration than others.

Some DTCs felt that the introduction of the DTC Network and the greater flexibilities given by ESRC were having positive benefits for collaborations including the encouragement of more innovative and flexible approaches:

‘The DTC Network, through the collaborative awards (above all), but also through the centrally-run internships scheme, has fostered a strong and diverse set of productive relationships with external organisations – public, private, third sector. It is quite critical to this success that the ESRC has not required DTCs to locate external partners who can provide up-front funds for PhD student fees or stipend. Varied, and often quite creative, forms of in-kind collaborations have been possible as a result, and the flexibility has in some cases drawn university social science researchers to consider formal external collaborations for the first time.’ Warwick DTC Director
Others supported the new approach but reported that making progress had been slower and more difficult than expected. Some felt that the ending of the separate CASE studentship programme and rolling it into DTC funding had actually made it more difficult to sustain the kinds of collaborative links they had had in the past because the CASE ‘brand’ had been distinctive. Less surprisingly, non-DTC institutions felt that the removal of the stand-alone CASE studentship funding was a loss and they made the case for (re)introducing a similar scheme which would sit outside DTC core funding. It was noted that the other Research Councils, such as the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and the EPSRC have, unlike ESRC, retained separate CASE programmes7.

There was evidence of innovative practice within DTCs to develop a more strategic and coherent approach to building collaborative partnerships rather than simply relying on historic and personal links. DTC Directors felt that the creation of DTCs was providing a focal point for setting up such collaborations and had helpfully taken the responsibility off the shoulders of individual supervisors. Some DTCs have developed methods for better identifying the needs of potential partners, such as setting up advisory groups which include a range of non-academic and business partners. The TSC reported that some DTC management boards were having strategic discussions on future collaborations and they are keen to transfer these lessons across the DTC network. There is support for doing this from individual DTCs:

‘DTCs could play a greater role as brokers of collaborative research opportunities and key gateways/focal points through which public, private and voluntary sector organisations can interact with our postgraduate cohorts; however, these activities require DTCs to further develop their internal capacities, which is currently viewed as a challenge for the Network and something the Council may wish to consider further as part of its review.’ North East DTC

The current 20 per cent minimum target for collaborations was seen by DTC representatives as realistic and achievable. Many felt that setting a higher threshold would lead to more creative interpretations of the definition of collaboration rather than a genuine increase.

Related to this there was a degree of uncertainty over the definition of collaboration and suspicion that some DTCs or pathways were stretching the definition too far. Conversely, others may unwittingly be overlooking activities which would count as collaborative. Whilst an over-precise definition of collaboration runs the risk of stifling innovation it is encouraging to hear that ESRC will be providing DTCs with some illustrative examples of collaboration to help clarify the definition.

**Collaborating partners**

A small number of non-academic employers were consulted on their experiences of working in collaborative partnerships with DTCs and on the value of collaborative studentships. All were very positive about the value of the studentships though some of these were still at an early stage. Some employers provided in kind support. Others, notably two public sector bodies, co-funded four to ten new PhDs students per year. Relationships between the partner organisations and DTCs worked well. The DTCs were valued for their

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7 There are some differences in the types of CASE award schemes operated by the different research councils. For example, the EPSRC has industrial or ‘iCASE’ awards. AHRC has collaborative doctoral awards.
role in acting as brokers between the employer and local universities, in setting up the collaborations – acting as a ‘one-stop shop’ - but also for giving their organisation easier access to a wider network of academic experts. Lessons learnt included: the need to allow sufficient lead time for the development of the proposal specification and the interviewing of students; and, for smaller scale collaborations, the risks of being too dependent on individual personal contacts which may be difficult to maintain when staff move.

For the collaborating organisations the main business benefits are: the direct benefits of the substantive research topic being undertaken; helping to improve the analytical and strategic thinking of the organisation, providing new perspectives on and better definitions of problems; and recruitment benefits to them as employers, offering a stream of potential permanent recruits who will already be familiar with the organisation and its needs.

Steady progress has been made in developing collaborations with non-academic partners and there has been a substantial increase in these overall. Within this, however, it is of concern that the number (and percentage share) of private sector collaborations has recently been falling rather than rising. This is likely to reduce the influence of social science and of social scientists in some important sectors of the economy as well as reducing a key potential source for co-funding. The economic downturn may be an external reason for this trend\(^8\) (and historic data shows there are fluctuations over time) but the ending of the separate CASE programme may also have contributed\(^9\). The CASE programme was a distinctive ‘brand’ recognised by employers and the annual award process provided a timely focus and incentive for seeking new collaborations or for renewing well-established ones. ESRC and the DTC network should explore whether a specific, well branded and cohesive programme (delivered through DTCs or separately) would help to reverse the decline. There may be lessons to learn from the other research councils. We strongly support the initiatives being taken by some DTCs to have strategic advisory boards with representatives from the business, public and voluntary sectors as well as appointing dedicated staff to organise collaborations.

**Case study: examples of collaborations**

**Danone and White Rose DTC**

The collaborative studentship resulted from existing research collaboration linkages with the University of Leeds. On the basis of this previous experience, the university approached Danone (based in Utrecht, Netherlands). Danone also had previous experience of collaborative studentships through European Union Marie Curie awards. The collaboration is with the Medical Nutrition and Early Life Nutrition Divisions at Danone.

The research issue involves trying to develop a method that can help mothers better feed their children, thus creating better bonding between mother and child which will help in future health and development of the child.

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8 There is evidence of a sharp decline in the private sector share in 2009 and 2010, perhaps in the wake of the recession, but by 2011 this share had risen to its highest level in eight years before falling again. The small absolute numbers involved mean it is difficult to identify clear trends or to attribute causation.

9 It should be noted, however, that CASE data for 2005-10 show that 80 per cent of the academic institutions participating in the scheme at that time are also now included within DTCs.
Most of the collaboration is in-kind support, although Danone also provide travel and subsistence costs for visits. There is considerable interest within Danone at the research topic being undertaken.

Danone would partake in another studentship, although if collaborating again it will be important to spend more time at the outset clarifying what each individual’s role in the project is. It was also noted that in comparison with the Marie Curie studentship, this ESRC DTC collaboration is much more flexible and less rigid – this is a real benefit for collaborators.

**Skills Development Scotland and Scotland DTC**

Skills Development Scotland (SDS) aims to support four ‘+3’ PhD studentships per year through the Scotland DTC. The first students were funded in the 2013/14 year, when owing to a strong set of applications, six students were exceptionally funded. It is anticipated that 12 will be funded at any one time over coming years.

The relationship was developed after the SDS Executive wanted to become more involved with, and enhance linkages with higher education. There was also a desire to increase capacity and knowledge on the Scottish labour market.

Liaison with the students is very important. A buddy system operates between each student and a senior SDS staff member. This is to ensure a good linkage between the student’s research and the user of that research. The call for the students is led by the Scotland DTC. SDS will identify the specific topic area, and this is then sent to the DTC for selection (this meeting also has SDS involvement). Students are then recruited.

SDS is keen to promote these pathways further and is looking at holding workshops and developing videos for prospective students. The collaboration has been positive, with good, helpful relations developed with the DTC Early examples of benefits include: positive engagement with universities and academic community more broadly; requests for SDS to participate in academic workshops; and offers made for SDS to give careers advice.

**International partnerships**

The PhD Partnering initiative was a pilot scheme, run in 2012, designed to ‘pump-prime’ the development of reciprocal institutional links between DTCs and developing and emerging centres of social science excellence overseas. This could have been through students working on complementary research topics or with similar methods. Each DTC could apply for top-up funding up to a maximum of £150,000 with the expected grant per partnership being around £7,000. ESRC also expected partnerships to have a level of co-funding (cash and/or in kind) from both sides. In the case of India ESRC negotiated funding links with the India Council of Social Science Research and the UK-India Education and Research Initiative. For China there was an arrangement with the UK-China Partners in Education.

It is too early to comprehensively assess the overall success and impact of the pilot as the awards were made in October 2012 and many partnerships are therefore still developing. However, the available information shows that most DTCs responded very positively to the opportunity, using the additional funds to initiate new links or enhance existing ones. Seventeen out of 21 DTCs successfully applied for funding with grants ranging between
£7,000 and £143,000. Just two DTCs did not apply. Partnerships have been developed with 64 universities and research institutes in 27 countries, with a significant number of collaborations being with institutions in China (nine) and India (10) but also in 12 sub-Saharan African countries and in three South American countries.

Although DTCs have been very positive about the scheme there have been a few frustrations over its operation: the necessarily brief duration of overseas visits because of the relatively small size of each award; the volume of administration required for a modest grant; and the delays and uncertainty resulting from ESRC’s decision to allow bids involving supervisors who did not yet have an ESRC-funded student.

In general, however, the available evidence suggest the scheme has made good progress towards meeting its intermediate aims of facilitating the development of reciprocal institutional links between the DTCs and existing and emerging centres of research excellence internationally; supporting the development of an international cohort of early career researchers with the skills, links and contacts to operate in the global research environment; supporting the development of social science research capacity in new research performing nations through the development of international training and development activities; and encouraging the development of intellectual networks to foster long-term sustainable research collaboration.

The Overseas Institutional Visits Scheme is a longer established programme for encouraging international collaborations. Small grants averaging £4,000 provide ESRC-funded students with the opportunity to take part in international research networks, to disseminate early research findings, to participate in seminars and other academic activities that are directly relevant to their research, or to undertake specialist research training that is not available within the UK. The Scheme was fully devolved to the DTC Network in May 2014. DTCs have been provided with funding to administer and award their own schemes and have been given considerable flexibility in how they do so. The scheme is relatively modest in scope. In 2013-2014 to date (for the 17 DTCs for which there is data) there have been 23 awards. In 2012-2013 there were 30 from these same DTCs. The number of awards made has been broadly stable over the last four years (around 20-30 a year, though with a dip in 2011-2012) but the success rate for applications has increased from 21 per cent in 2011-2012 to 59 per cent in 2012-2013 and, so far in 2013-2014, 42 per cent. It is too early to assess the specific effect of devolving the scheme entirely to the DTCs but recent improvements in the success rate suggest that applications may be becoming better targeted.

**Case study: examples of International PhD Partnering**

The Bloomsbury DTC provides a good example of the Partnering initiative in practice:

‘Across the first two cohorts, we have a total of 18 students engaged directly in international research activity, half of these working in sub-Saharan Africa (especially East Africa) on issues relating to health in a broad sense (notably HIV/AIDS, but also food and security), with a further grouping focused on the Asian sub-continent and adjacent areas (India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Burma) in terms of political issues, plus a small number of others working on disparate (often comparative) topics across Europe, North Africa and Israel. The third cohort will essentially maintain that pattern, with a further 12 students working in similar areas. Much of this work involves collaboration with NGOs and charities rather than with other HEIs. … Members of the DTC Board are currently involved in a
complementary initiative aimed at developing connections with universities in East Africa and Pakistan with a view to supporting the growth of their in-country doctoral provision, enabling them to become research partners in the medium term.

The Essex DTC received funding for two partnerships schemes: a UK-India partnership with UKIERI and a UK-China partnership with Renmin University. Through the latter bid, one PhD student and their supervisor will travel to Renmin University. During this trip a one day course on the ‘Understanding Society’ study will be given to the researchers at the National Survey Research Centre. The remaining days will be spent meeting with researchers to discuss possible collaborations. In the second year, there will be a telephone conference to discuss progress in collaborative projects. In the third year a PhD student and supervisor will visit the University of Essex from Renmin University and they will hold a one day course on their survey, the Chinese General Social Survey.

**Impacts on awards and disciplines**

**Impact on number of awards**

The creation of the DTCs has seen an expansion in the number of postgraduates funded through the ESRC programme, a considerable achievement given the overall reductions in funding faced by ESRC. This has largely been achieved by encouraging institutions to use the ESRC-funding flexibly in order to lever in additional funding from within the DTC institutions themselves and from external non-academic collaborators. Thus whilst the number of funded places allocated by ESRC has only risen slightly since 2011-2012 the number of actual awards made has risen from 645 to 770, a 19 per cent increase in the number of postgraduates receiving funding for the high quality training offered through the DTC programme. In other words, by encouraging institutions to use co-funding ESRC is achieving more impact with its funding even though resources are more constrained.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Allocated by ESRC</th>
<th>Places awarded by DTCs</th>
<th>Variation</th>
<th>Percentage change in number allocated by ESRC</th>
<th>Percentage change in number of awards</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2011-2012</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>645</td>
<td>+45</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012-2013</td>
<td>612</td>
<td>753</td>
<td>+141</td>
<td>+2</td>
<td>+17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-2014</td>
<td>603</td>
<td>770</td>
<td>+167</td>
<td>-1.5</td>
<td>+2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net change 2013-2014 on 2011-2012</td>
<td>+3</td>
<td>+125</td>
<td>+122</td>
<td>+0.5</td>
<td>+19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These overall increases in the number of awards have not been spread evenly across the 21 DTCs. Whilst overall the number of awards increased by 19 per cent between 2011-2012 and 2013-2014 the range was between a six per cent reduction (representing one less award) and an increase of 55 per cent (representing 24 additional awards). The median increase was 15 per cent. Three DTCs experienced no increase or a small decrease in the
number of awards while six saw increases of 25 per cent or more. There was no significant
difference between consortia DTCs and single institution DTCs in the relative scale of
change – a mean increase of 20 per cent for consortia (a total of 71 additional awards) and
19 per cent for single institutions (54 additional awards).

DTCs have used a variety of sources of funding to co-fund the ESRC awards. For example,
the Scotland DTC (Scottish Graduate School of Social Sciences) reports that increased
collaborative working with non-academic partners has enabled them to increase the number
of awards (excluding project-linked awards) from 65 in 2011-2012 to 89 different types of
awards in 2013-201410.

It is however apparent that the majority of the additional funding has come from a
realloclution of funds within the universities rather than from other external bodies, though
precise data on the different sources are not available. From the universities’ perspective
the use of QR or other ‘in-house’ funding to provide more co-funding for ESRC
studentships has the significant drawback of reducing the funding available for other
activities, including other research or training.

There is much variation across DTCs in terms of the funding they are attracting from
elsewhere. There is a requirement that, for a studentship to be ‘badged’, ESRC-funding
should constitute at least 50 per cent of the total value of the award but some DTCs
queried why there can’t be more flexibility on this requirement. It is argued that more
flexibility on part funding would allow ESRC’s funding to be used more broadly and perhaps
to have an even wider influence on standards. Against this it could be argued that greater
flexibility on the minimum percentage share required would dilute the positive cohort effect
and the improvement in quality that ESRC is trying to achieve.

It was also suggested that leveraging in funding can be a double-edged sword as money
coming in has to be managed which brings an administrative burden. It was noted that
employing managers and administrative staff is taking money from studentships, and this is
ongoing, rather than solely to do with the initial set-up process.

‘With the desire to see greater co-funding of studentships our partner HEIs have all
agreed to devote funds to support studentships. …This has been largely achieved by
re-directing existing university-level studentship budgets to DTC co-funding with the
consequence that proportionately more of our PhD students are pursuing their
studies under ESRC DTC terms and conditions. In many respects this is a desirable
thing but it has had the consequence that the funds available to support good
students who are not eligible for ESRC awards (for eg non-EU students) have been
reduced.’ South East DTC

‘Two centres said their DTCs had enabled a substantial increase in the number of
studentships beyond the annual allocation, achieved by (a) institutional contributions,
(b) success in further bidding opportunities, and (c) external co-funding or enhanced
CASE activity.’ AcSS

10 Mid- Term Review of the Scottish Graduate School of Social Sciences for the Scottish Funding Council,
March 2014, p2
Impact on disciplines

The overall increase in numbers of ESRC branded awards between 2011-2012 and 2013-2014 has been 19 per cent though, if a longer perspective is taken, the increase since 2009-2010 has been just seven per cent. But, as the table below shows, some disciplines are faring much better than others.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Number of awards 2013-2014</th>
<th>Target number</th>
<th>Percentage change since 2011-2012</th>
<th>Percentage change since 2009-2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Area and development studies</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>+9</td>
<td>-18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demography</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>+10</td>
<td>-15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic and social history</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>+28</td>
<td>+21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>+13</td>
<td>+24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>-10</td>
<td>-32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental planning</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>+141</td>
<td>+128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human geography</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>+40</td>
<td>+12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linguistics</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>+60</td>
<td>+60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management and business studies</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>+41</td>
<td>-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics and international relations</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>+33</td>
<td>+31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>+38</td>
<td>+65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science and technology studies</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>+86</td>
<td>-43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social anthropology</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>-15</td>
<td>-18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social policy</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>+86</td>
<td>+52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social work</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>+7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socio-legal studies</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>+70</td>
<td>+95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociology</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>+79</td>
<td>+12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stats, methods and computing</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>+73</td>
<td>-21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>770</td>
<td>540</td>
<td>+19</td>
<td>+7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AQM</td>
<td>60</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interdisciplinary</td>
<td>60</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For disciplines with relatively small absolute numbers of awards it can be difficult to identify consistent trends (see Annex 4 for full data). The data shows that in terms of awards funded wholly or in part by ESRC ten of the eighteen disciplines are in healthy shape – they have achieved or exceeded the target numbers of awards set by ESRC and have seen pretty consistent increases in both the last three and the last five years. Of the larger and medium sized disciplines social policy, sociology, socio-legal studies, management and business studies, human geography, and psychology have all experienced substantial increases in studentships funded wholly or partly by ESRC. The priority discipline of economics has seen a 24 per cent increase since 2009-2010 and has exceeded its target by 75 per cent.
The three disciplines of greatest concern are education, social anthropology and social work. All three are failing to reach the target level. Education has continued its long term decline in numbers of new studentships each year. Social anthropology shows small year to year variations but the trend is downward. Similarly Social Work is failing to increase. It would appear that, in the context of the move to DTCs, these disciplines either do not attract enough applicants of sufficient quality, or are losing out in the processes of studentship allocations.

It is impossible to be certain what would have happened to each discipline in the absence of the DTC network. The new flexibilities in funding have enabled DTCs to increase the number of studentships receiving ESRC support in most disciplines.

More negatively, it is apparent that the creation of the DTC Network has had no measurable effect on the shortage subjects of education, social anthropology or social work. The position for economics, advanced quantitative methods, management and business studies, language based area studies and interdisciplinary studies is much more encouraging: all have exceeded their ‘steers’ or targets and the first three have experienced consistent upward trends since 2011-2012 or earlier.

Data for all new entrant postgraduate students in the social sciences, including the nine out of ten who do not receive ESRC-funding, shows that in the three year period between 2010-2011 and 2012-2013 numbers of new entrants increased from 7,750 to 7,820, a one per cent increase. For the same period the increase in new studentships funded wholly or in part by ESRC was 3.2 per cent (from 730 to 753). The overall numbers of new postgraduates studying education were more or less stable in this period (1,470 new entrants in both 2010-2011 and 2012-2013) compared with a fall in new ESRC-funded studentships of 13 per cent (from 47 down to 41 studentships). For social work there was some fluctuation in overall numbers of entrants over the three years but the total in 2012-2013 was the same as in 2010-2011 (165 new entrants). ESRC social work studentships show a similar pattern of marginal fluctuations but there has been no sustained growth. The overall numbers studying anthropology rose by 10 per cent in this period (from 255 to 280) compared with no significant change in the number of new ESRC-funded studentships.

This comparison, though lacking Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data for 2013-2014, suggests that in the three years up to 2012-2013 the rate of increase in the number of new ESRC-branded studentships was higher than the general increase in the number of new social science postgraduates (3.2 per cent compared with one per cent). This is consistent with the evidence from the review that many DTCs have used the new flexibilities on part-funding to increase the overall numbers of students receiving ESRC awards. Trends in the shortage disciplines of education, social work and social anthropology are difficult to interpret because of the small numbers involved, but the contrast seen in education between the steady fall in ESRC studentships and the fairly stable numbers of new postgraduates studying this discipline is noteworthy. It implies that demand is stable but that not enough candidates are able to meet the standard required for ESRC-funding and/or miss out during internal DTC allocation processes, and/or do not apply to those institutions where that funding might be available.

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11 See Annex 5 for data on all new social science postgraduates by discipline. HESA data is not yet available for new postgraduates in 2013-2014 so these comparisons have had to be based on the three year period 2010-2011 to 2012-2013.
National Benchmarks and Discipline Steers

In order to monitor the overall national distribution of studentships by discipline the ESRC has established national disciplinary benchmarks to ensure each discipline is maintaining a sufficient critical mass. These benchmarks allow both ESRC and individual DTCs to be aware of overall trends and to identify areas of concern but they are not used to set disciplinary targets for individual DTCs.

The ESRC has also applied a more prescriptive steer to those priority areas where it is likely that failure to act will lead to serious weaknesses in the capacity and quality of the UK social sciences. DTCs which are particularly strong in a priority area are required to allocate a set proportion of their studentships to the pathway(s) in that discipline. The ‘Priority Areas’, two of which attract higher levels of stipend, are economics, advanced quantitative methods, management and business, language based area studies, and interdisciplinary studies. Overall, the mean proportion of studentship places subject to a steer by ESRC is 36 per cent (median 33 per cent) and for 15 out of the 21 DTCs the steer relates to fewer than two in five of their places. However, for three DTCs, because of the extent of their specialisation in key priority areas, the steer affects over 80 per cent of their places.

In general DTCs and the learned societies are supportive of the idea of there being national priority areas though inevitably there is more disagreement when it comes to exactly how these priorities should be implemented and which disciplines or skill areas should be included. Many welcome the effects that the identification of priorities is having:

‘The ways in which different DTC Centres are steered has on the whole enhanced social science capacity in particular areas, meaning that, in the main, PhD funding and future career building feels better planned, with needs more clearly identified and targeted.’ Southampton DTC

The priority focus on advanced quantitative methods is considered by the Royal Statistical Society (RSS) to have made a significant difference in strengthening the value of statistics as a discipline, producing a large increase in studentships in quantitative social research, helping to build the right critical mass of quantitative researchers, and has increased collaboration between statisticians and social scientists.

For some disciplines experiencing decline or nil growth there is disappointment that the existing approach of identifying national benchmarks but not prescribing targets for individual DTCs has proved ineffective:

‘Social work / social care numbers across DTCs were below target… as were several other disciplines, so there is an ongoing need for the ESRC to insist on DTCs with social work pathways achieving their target proportions of social care students.’
Joint University Council – Social Work Education Committee (JUCSWEC)

For economics there is a concern that its identification as a priority area with a specific quota of places may have led, in some instances, to ‘rent seeking’ behaviour – ie students from other disciplines, such as political economy or quantitative sociology, presenting their applications as ‘economics’ in order to receive awards from the economics quota. It is argued, therefore, that changing actual behaviours is more important than simply setting quotas.
The main criticisms or concerns about the identification of priority areas include:

- concern about the longer term and unintended consequences for disciplines not identified as being priority areas:
  
  ‘Within smaller centres whose awards are mostly ring-fenced for particular subjects, non-steered areas (particularly those using more qualitative methods) are left underfunded. This distorts perceptions about what kind of research is valued, and affects wider processes and policies for example when new posts are required to reflect these steers.’ AcSS

- concern that priority steers which may make sense at a national strategic level can lead to detrimental effects for individual DTCs which are trying to develop their own capacity building strategies to strengthen the individual DTC. Some DTCs would like to see a more collaborative and negotiated approach between ESRC and DTCs on the implementation of the priority areas:
  
  ‘Any future arrangement and allocation of priority training areas (steers in the allocation of studentships) should allow for a combination of ‘steered’ awards, and a sufficient number of awards that are open to students wishing to study in non-steered areas. Without this, there is a risk of very significant impact on training and development, and on departmental and institution-wide priority setting, which can be detrimental to the broad range of on-going social science training in which institutions engage. …Greater flexibility for individual DTCs to negotiate with the ESRC about capacity building as a Research Office (RO) and not just for the benefit of the Network would be welcomed – it may be the case that wider negotiations across the network mean that the needs of the Network can still be met whilst providing more flexibility to each DTC.’ Essex DTC

- concern that the current set of priorities does not fully or accurately reflect the key shortage areas or are not based on the most up to date assessment:
  
  ‘The fact that certain areas are being exceeded, whilst others are under-recruiting, suggests that the steers could be more accurately assessed, or have more flexibility within them to respond to the identification of shortfalls in social science capacity.’ Southampton DTC

  ‘[ESRC should]…commission up-to-date research to identify which disciplines are in most need of ring-fenced allocations following the financial crisis, and give more guidance on the distribution of studentships across subject areas both within DTCs and across the UK.’ ACSS12

- a need for ESRC to clarify what is the real force of a steer; what are ESRC’s expectations and the consequences for DTCs if they do not meet them – will they be held to account if they fall only marginally below the target? It may be more

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12 The ESRC's demographic review of postgraduate training is currently being refreshed and will provide up to date evidence on which disciplines are in most need of additional support.
reasonable to assess the effectiveness of the steer for each DTC after, say, three years rather than on an annual basis.

**Awarding studentships**

Concerns have been raised over the number of 1+3 awards being made as compared with +3s. It is argued that, with increased funding pressures, there is an almost inevitable drift to DTCs making more +3 awards in order to maximise the number of studentships. There is concern that the increasing focus on +3 awards is narrowing access to PhD training for those undergraduates who cannot afford to self-fund a one year Masters degree prior to applying for a PhD:

‘The allocation of studentships by DTCs increasingly favours students who already have a master’s degree. The absence of funding for master’s degrees means that this advantages those who can afford to self-fund. …If self-funding of a master’s typically becomes a prerequisite for a PhD, this obviously discriminates against students from less advantaged backgrounds and is contrary to goals of widening participation’

British Sociological Association (BSA)

As well as the issue of access, 1+3 studentships may also be of particular value in fostering interdisciplinary research training by giving students greater scope and time to develop skills and knowledge beyond their first discipline.

In 2010-2011 there was a more or less equal split between 1+3 and +3 awards. Since then the proportion of 1+3 awards has fallen and that of +3s has increased. Most of the reduction in the number and percentage share of 1+3 awards occurred between 2011-2012 and 2012-2013. Since then the situation has stabilised with some increase in 2013-2014.

DTCs do appear to be using the new flexibilities to structure awards to meet the particular needs of each pathway or of particular students. For example, the ‘other’ category includes some +3.5 and 1+3.5 awards, and the number of 2+2 and +4 awards has increased from 52 to 73.

**Trends in types of award 2011-2012 to 2013-2014**

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<td>61</td>
<td>5</td>
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DTC Directors and other DTC representatives felt that financial constraints were only part of the explanation for the predominance of +3 studentships. 1+3 awards were not necessarily the right approach and might not suit many students. Some felt that the 1+3 awards were not necessarily reaching deprived groups and there was sometimes a shortage
of applicants for these types of award. It was usually the case that +3 applications were of a higher calibre because the candidates already had proven track records at Masters level and were better able to prepare a strong proposal. Directors felt that, faced by a number of strong applications, it was difficult to try to make a separate assessment of a student’s longer term potential against the quality of their application and current level of skills. There was a risk that boosting the number of 1+3 awards would mean the DTCs having to select weaker students.

A number of the DTCs do actively monitor the balance between +3 and 1+3 awards. Some used the new flexibilities such as +3.5 awards where a candidate’s previous research training at Masters level was not strong enough. However, it is to be noted that one DTC awarded no 1+3 awards in 2013-2014 and in another instance less than 10 per cent of awards were in this category.

The TSC is concerned about the consequences of the drift away from 1+3 awards, has been closely monitoring the situation and will be reviewing what further steps are required. DTC representatives themselves concurred that ESRC needed to decide what the policy should be. They felt that, if it was a major issue, then there should be fixed allocation pots of +3 and 1+3 funds. Otherwise soft regulation was preferred, eg constantly sharing and monitoring information about this.

There is clearly a balance to be struck between, on the one hand, allowing DTCs sufficient autonomy to make their own decisions on the awards which will best suit the design of their pathways as well as the training needs of individual students and, on the other, ensuring that DTCs are not unintentionally creating barriers to access for those students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The TSC should assess how effective active monitoring and the sharing of good practice is likely to be as against a more directive approach using targets and/or fixed funding allocations. However this is best achieved, we believe the objective should be to bring the 1+3 share back to at least the two-fifths level seen in 2011-2012 with the aim of then restoring the 50/50 balance seen in earlier years. Universities can, of course, also address the access and equality issue directly by providing bursaries from their own funds to ensure graduates from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are able to undertake Masters courses.

**Process for making awards**

The ways in which individual DTCs decide the allocation of studentships between their different pathways vary a good deal. Some use prescribed quotas for each pathway, usually based on the historic quotas used for each discipline under the former funding structure. Some have moved completely to a single, centralised open competition across the DTC such that studentships were awarded purely on the basis of the best candidates irrespective of pathway or discipline. Many others operate a mixed approach with a proportion of places awarded according to quotas and the remainder awarded through an open competition across the DTC. For example, the Wales DTC allocated half its awards on the basis of quotas and the other half through a competition between project bids. White Rose DTC operates a 60/40 split between quota and competition.

Some felt that open competitions were especially appropriate for interdisciplinary pathways where students from a range of disciplinary backgrounds had the relevant skills. Where quotas were used DTCs convened independent panels to review nominations and
applications in order to ensure that consistent judgements on quality and standards were being made across the DTC. Likewise panels were used to decide the outcomes of the open competitions.

The study conducted by Lunt et al in the first year of operation of the new DTCs reported that:

‘Those DTCs which organised an internal ‘open’ competition quickly found that this could shift the balance of studentships allocated to disciplines, with some disciplines no longer receiving studentships and others receiving ‘disproportionate’ numbers:

“We produced the rank order of… every single studentship application that had been made… we do the rankings, we make sure the steers are met, and those are the awards. We basically hold a completely open competition for the available studentships”13.

There seemed to be uncertainty on whether ESRC had given the DTCs an explicit steer or set an expectation that they should move to open competitions14. Whilst some appeared unaware of any steer or had taken little notice of it, other DTCs had responded positively by moving wholly to an open competition:

‘We have operated SE DTC on the basis of steers from ESRC that the focus on candidate selection should be principally on application quality and that the use of disciplinary and/or institutional quotas should be discouraged as far as is possible. We believe that in our selection processes we have gone a long way towards achieving this goal but nonetheless tensions naturally exist between discipline pathways and between institutions (in consortia) over the allocation of resources. …When issuing the invitation to tender for DTCs some guidance/suggestions on ways to address this issue and clear statements of what would and what would not be acceptable practice would be welcome.’ South East DTC

Others commented that moving away from discipline-based historical quotas and implementing open competitions for studentships had been one of the biggest challenges. Gaining the buy-in, trust and involvement of staff in the processes for student selection had been vital – the key lesson was having transparent and open procedures. Directors reported that, although they were moving towards more open competitions, there are challenges with this approach as partner institutions in the DTC may feel they are not benefiting fairly. However, there was no clear split between consortia and single institution DTCs in the likelihood of operating an open competition or retaining quotas.

**Common deadlines for applications and decisions**

There was a virtually unanimous view that the closing date for applications and decision dates for awards should be uniform across the DTC network as the current un-coordinated system of different dates for different DTCs had led to significant problems and inefficiencies. At present it was too easy for applicants to ‘play the field’, apply for a number of awards within and across DTCs and then provisionally accept more than one offer before finally opting for the best one. DTCs complained strongly that this made the process

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13 Lunt et al, op. cit. p.11
14 The steer from ESRC was that DTCs should fund the best students.
administratively complex and unnecessarily costly for institutions as it created uncertainty on whether all their places had truly been filled. There was also an (unproven) suspicion by some that the current system of variable application and decision dates gave single institution DTCs an advantage in the selection process.

For all these reasons there was strong support for implementing a uniform deadline for applications and a common date for announcing awards.

‘Impose a single deadline and process for studentship applications to all DTCs, and coordinate with other Research Councils on submission dates and funding durations for the benefit of students on shared pathways.’ AcSS

Any common allocation date would, however, need to pay attention to the international market for recruiting students (eg in economics the competition was often with North America).

**Structures and funding**

**The effects of concentration**

The concentration of ESRC’s postgraduate research funding into 21 DTCs comprising 12 individual institutions and nine consortia, including 46 institutions in total, was an understandable response to developing excellence and achieving the necessary critical mass in the face of significant overall reductions in the Council’s budget. Simply continuing to spread the available funding ever more thinly over a large number of outlets would have been a costly and un-strategic response which may have led to the dilution rather than the enhancement of the quality and impact of social science research training. There are also many positive benefits to focusing resources in a way which provides students with a comprehensive, broad-based grounding in research skills and knowledge.

However, the new structure which has emerged is even more concentrated than ESRC and the then Training and Development Board originally envisaged or intended with none of the planned Doctoral Training Units being commissioned. Additional funding cuts during the commissioning process meant that an even higher quality threshold had to be applied and all the DTU applicants and some DTC applicants fell below this new line. The new structure which has actually emerged is a very strongly two tier one with relatively impermeable boundaries between the two. These boundaries are likely to become even more fixed over time as existing DTCs develop and consolidate their roles. For those institutions outside the DTC network the barriers to entry now appear very formidable and discouraging.

There was a widespread view from universities outside the DTC network and from some learned societies that, whilst they recognised the success of the DTCs in concentrating expertise and creating centres of training excellence, there were also very significant drawbacks and problems with the DTC model. Some DTCs also expressed concern about the barriers to collaboration with non-DTC universities which had emerged. The concerns and criticisms focused around a number of themes.

**Excluding ‘pockets of excellence’**

Strong representations have been made that the new structure ignores or undervalues smaller pockets or centres of excellence which are to be found in institutions outside the
DTC network. These, it is argued, are often innovative, interdisciplinary and headed by leading experts in their fields but are too small to sustain a whole DTC. It has also been pointed out that some of these achieved Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) scores equivalent to or higher than departments which are now part of some DTCs.

‘[The DTC model]… is focused on research-intensive universities. Whilst this may make sense overall, there are pockets of real research strength in other universities which are inevitably not able to contribute to doctoral supervision in accordance with, and with the studentship resource, of the DTC model. In social work one clear example is UEA which has a very strong tradition of social work research, especially in child welfare where they are one of the field leaders, yet they have no DTC studentships. Nor are [we] aware of many examples whereby expertise from such pockets of excellence is bought into DTC provision, as was originally an intention of the scheme.’ JUCSWEC

The Media, Communication and Cultural Studies Association, using 2008 RAE results, noted that of the 16 highest scoring HEIs in this disciplinary area only six are associated with ESRC DTCs:

‘While many post-92 universities are in the top 16 all of the universities associated with DTCs in our field are pre-92. This would suggest that there is considerable research excellence and supervisory capacity in our field outside the current DTCs.’

Similarly a number of non-DTC institutions argued that leading international experts in some fields who were not associated with a DTC were now effectively excluded from sharing their expertise with ESRC postgraduates.

It has also been pointed out that some non-DTC institutions achieved RAE scores for their Units of Assessment (UoAs) equivalent to or higher than units which are now part of DTCs.

‘A ranking based on RAE2008 results for the core social science UoAs reveals that the volume of 3* and 4* activity in the top ranked 20 HEIs not supported by DTC funding is approximately one per cent higher than that of 20 HEIs that were supported. Thus although it could be argued that some small pockets of excellence were supported there were identifiable and comparable pockets of excellence that did not receive ESRC-funding for postgraduate training.’ University of Brighton

By contrast, others felt that this concern was a considerable overstatement of the position with the number of truly excellent centres outside the DTC network being very small and often dependent on just one or two individual experts. The TSC felt strongly that RAE scores had been taken fully into account in deciding which bids for DTC status should be approved and that, within the constraints imposed by a reduced budget, all the top centres of excellence had been included.

**Barriers to supervision**

A related issue raised was that the exclusion of some pockets of excellence containing the recognised leaders in a field meant that it was impossible for the latter to formally supervise students located within a DTC university. There are too many barriers and disincentives to make this possible at present. Doctoral students cannot be registered with a non-DTC
institution and the current recording of supervision in HESA, and therefore for the REF, does not acknowledge the contribution of co-supervisors. A new mechanism was needed for exchanging supervision on an equitable basis. If ESRC’s criteria of maximising breadth and depth of specialist social science research training are to be met, such issues should be addressed.

**Diversity and widening access**

A further negative effect of the ‘two-tier’ system which has emerged, with the more or less complete exclusion of post-1992 universities from the DTC network, was thought to be that of making access to high quality postgraduate training more difficult for underrepresented and disadvantaged undergraduates and those requiring more flexible patterns of study.

‘Widening participation students do not, in the main, access pre-1992s at either undergraduate or postgraduate levels. The concentration of ESRC doctoral research in the pre-1992s has significant implications for widening participation and for social mobility.’ Leeds Beckett University

This was not however simply about the effects of the exclusion of the post-1992s from the Network. One pre-1992 university observed that the current programmes of training offered by the DTCs did not tend to offer the flexibility that would suit diverse types of doctoral students such as weekend training programmes and online opportunities. It was argued that subjects such as social work and education, attracting considerable numbers of part-time, mature, and often mid-career students, were also not well catered for within the current DTC framework.

In the light of these concerns over the effects of the ‘bifurcation’ between DTCs and non-DTCs a number of contributors to the review suggested more inclusive approaches which would moderate the very impermeable barriers which have arisen. There was support for a greater focus on establishing pathways of study which could be based on collaborations between DTCs and pockets of excellence in non-DTC institutions and which would, for example, make it possible for a postgraduate to be supervised by a key expert in another non-DTC institution.

‘We believe ESRC should review its approach to focus on establishing a national system of doctoral training which optimises the expertise available from across the sector. This system should be inclusive and built around relationships between the core DTC members and specific pathways in other institutions. Basing collaboration around pathways is a way of recognising strengths and weaknesses and overcomes the tendency to exclude whole institutions. It is also more compatible with the original ESRC focus on pathways rather than institutions.’ Plymouth University

The inflexibility created by the current approach to DTCs, with the structure of collaborations set for five year periods, was also criticised. It was argued that this created inertia in the funding model making it unable to recognise or quickly respond to changes in the research environment or new and emerging research outside the Network.

15 Written evidence submitted by the University of East Anglia
‘…these collaborations are established over a relatively long period of time – five years in total – and this can leave the system comparatively unable to respond effectively to shorter term changes, including emerging areas of strength in some institutions and a loss of strength in others. …It would be good, therefore, particularly given the ESRC’s evident interest in flexible training platforms, if the system itself were better able to support, promote and sustain that flexibility. This might involve retaining the strengths of the current system, but combining them with a capacity to give ESRC recognition to particular subjects or even courses at non-DTC institutions (as ‘associate members’ of DTCs for instance), or giving interim DTC status to institutions, schools, disciplines or subject areas that have demonstrated excellent performance in the very recent past (through publication, grant income, and so on).’ UEA

We were interested to hear that the TSC is considering introducing greater flexibilities in the future such that DTCs could widen and introduce new pathways, or new institutions later in the contract, perhaps through reference to the new REF results when they become available. We welcome this approach and believe there is a strong case for expecting existing DTCs to take account of the new REF results by widening their scope to include other institutions which have achieved excellent outcomes in relevant areas. The REF will break down institutional scores into components reflecting output, research impact and research environment. Future assessments of DTCs could therefore attach significant weight to research environment as well as scores on output and impact. Separate accreditation specifically for advanced training could also give kite marks to pockets of excellence, which DTCs would then want to collaborate with of their own accord.

Consortia and single institution DTCs

A key question for evaluating the success of the DTC model is whether consortia or single institution DTCs provide the best model for delivering the quality and range of training required or whether they are both equally valid models. The TSC has observed from its visits to DTCs that, on the whole, consortia are more effective than single institutions in meeting the objectives of the initiative.

This may be because consortia are more likely to be able to provide the range and diversity of training and development required due to the number of different institutions and departments involved. However, there is to date no robust evidence for drawing any definitive conclusion – larger single institution DTCs are also able to provide many of the benefits related to having a sufficient ‘critical mass’. It is clear that in the first three years consortia DTCs have faced more challenges in establishing themselves and developing new ways of working across the DTC as a whole. Judgements about the success of consortia as compared with single institution DTCs are therefore likely to be premature until the consortia DTCs have reached their ‘steady-state’.

Single institution DTCs acknowledge that for them the process of transition has been more straightforward. They do, however, also recognise the challenge they face in providing the required breadth and variety of experience for their students as well as fostering an awareness of the wider Network amongst staff and students:
'As a single-institution DTC, we are likely to have had fewer challenges than other DTCs engaged in consortia. However, building relationships and remaining aware of Network-wide initiatives does prove somewhat problematic.' Essex DTC

'It is recognised that, as a single institution centre, the implementation of the DTC Network… has potentially been easier to manage. Our key challenge is communication to pathway coordinators, supervisors and students about the network: its existence, aims and purposes, and that DTC provision is planned nationally rather than at individual centre level. Thus while single centre institutions work well in the organisation and management of PhD provision, there could be more linked events between centres on specific training activities and thematic or methodological interests.' Southampton DTC

Some single institution DTCs, whilst recognising this limitation in the single institution model, felt there were other alternatives to simply adopting the consortia model in its entirety. For example, the London DTC directors are discussing the possibility of a regional federation, which would generate economies of scale without losing the distinctiveness and the level of local engagement and ownership that a single institution DTC can achieve.

There must also be question as to whether some single institutions simply have too few ESRC-funded studentships to be able to provide a sufficient critical mass for the type of training and student cohort experience envisaged in ESRC 2009\textsuperscript{16}. Six DTCs have 22 or fewer new ESRC-funded students each year compared with the median of 32. Five of these six are single institution DTCs. For single institutions the median is 26, for consortia 47.

For the next round of commissioning it would be beneficial for institutions with small numbers of funded places to partner with others. However, it should be noted that the ESRC-funded cohort is often part of a much larger body of social science postgraduates within the institution who share much of the same training experience as the ESRC students. Arguably it is the size of this larger body of social science postgraduates within the institution - who will also be accessing the Advanced Methods courses - which should be taken into account in deciding whether the DTC has a sufficient critical mass.

For consortia DTCs the process of transition has been much more challenging and protracted, much more so than most anticipated. The challenges have included setting up and reaching agreement on common shared administrative processes across the constituent institutions; finding the required funding and staff for the implementation process; resolving between the institutions who should pay for what - many DTCs pointed out that some other research councils funded these administrative costs whereas ESRC did not; and reaching agreement on common terminology and procedures as these often differed between institutions.

'The administrative burden of running a DTC has turned out to be much greater than initially anticipated particularly with respect to accountability requirements and reporting… I understand that some research councils pay for some limited administration costs but not ESRC. Our PhD processes have all changed to some degree to fit in with the DTC model though this has been achieved by committing more resources to administration than had been anticipated.' South East DTC

\textsuperscript{16} Postgraduate Training and Development Guidelines, ESRC, 2009
Representatives from non-lead institutions in consortia DTCs also felt that one of the main problems in being part of a DTC was the administrative and financial burden and resolving who pays and who benefits. Having co-supervisors across the institutions means the transfer of funds can be problematic. There is also an issue around who ‘owns’ the students when compiling the statistics, and other very basic processes, ie who pays for expenses for a supervisor to travel to a meeting.

Concerns about the administrative burden and its cost were however by no means confined to consortia DTCs alone:

‘The continual handover of financial responsibility combined with accountability requirements places a huge administrative burden on institutions. One DTC director said it took two years to realise the extent of resources needed, including new high-level full-time administration posts and a majority proportion of directors’ and deputy directors’ time. ‘Our [pre-existing] administrator now spends 75 per cent of her time administering studentship competition. The entire network rests on good will.’ AcSS

There was widespread agreement that funding for and timely appointment of a Director for each DTC was crucial for both the setting-up phase and for the longer term development of a DTC. The need for a senior level and preferably full-time Director post and for strong pathway leaders was not always sufficiently appreciated at the beginning and there have been some problems of high staff turnover for Director roles. In Wales the DTC has obtained additional funding from the Welsh Government to part-fund the Director post. The TSC sees it as a key task to raise the profile of the Director role and is considering a two stage commissioning process to ensure Directors are in place at the outset. In addition, in some DTCs management boards have become a very effective route for discussions about the future shape of provision, including collaborations. The TSC intends to encourage the development of these across the network.

In the light of this evidence we believe it is essential that, for the next round of DTC applications, bidders should be required to specify in some detail how they propose to manage the DTC and the resources which will be devoted to this. This would include provision made for a Director post. The adequacy of these proposals should have a significant bearing on whether an application is approved.

In our view it is too early to conclude that consortia DTCs as such are necessarily the optimal model though some single institution DTCs may be too small to provide the critical mass of training and opportunities required or to build a strong student cohort effect. For future rounds small single institutions (those with small numbers of social science postgraduates) should consider forming partnerships with other institutions in the same region. But we also agree that looser federations between DTCs in the same broad region, such as the experiment in London, could offer many of the benefits of networking without all the administrative costs and complexities of full consortia. We do not favour a move to exclusively consortia DTCs – the key question should be whether a proposed DTC will be able to provide the range and quality of training experiences as well as strategic management and administrative resources required, not its organisational composition.
Comparisons with the other research councils: DTPs, DTCs and CDTs

The seven UK research councils use broadly comparable approaches and structures for funding postgraduate training though there are significant differences in the detail of implementation. ESRC is, however, unique in having moved largely to a single model for all its studentship funding though, arguably, within that single DTC model there is still a degree of variety in approaches. The ESRC DTCs also embrace previously separate funding routes such as the CASE studentships – there is the specific 20 per cent target for collaborations with non-academic partners. Annex 6 shows the range of funding routes used by all the research councils and, where available, the approximate numbers of studentships awarded through each route each year.

All seven research councils fund studentships through Doctoral Training Partnerships or Centres (DTPs, DTCs). The distinctive feature of these is that, collectively, they aim to cover the full range of disciplines or pathways for which the relevant council is responsible. They are not primarily focused on a single substantive theme or issue such as tackling social inequality or climate change, though ESRC’s DTCs often group their studentship pathways according to specific thematic programmes – for example, Kings College London DTC groups its ESRC studentships according to 15 interdisciplinary themes such as ‘Military and Regional Security’ or ‘Health Policy, Effectiveness and Evaluation’. Within these the ESRC-funded students work alongside students from other non-social science disciplines as well as social science postgraduates who are not ESRC-funded.

Three councils, AHRC, EPSRC and the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) also fund in addition Centres for Doctoral Training (CDTs). The key defining feature of CDTs is that they are focused on specific themes, priority areas, or priority skill gaps and are designed to be interdisciplinary in approach. For example, AHRC funds seven thematic CDTs focusing on design, modern languages and heritage. EPSRC currently funds over 70 CDTs in 28 universities covering issues such as energy, the digital economy, the life sciences interface and nanoapplications. The mid-term review of EPSRC’s centres concluded that the CDT approach was an effective way of training a cohort of students and allowed students more time to gain some specific skills; that many of the centres had succeeded in leveraging substantial industrial funding using a variety of approaches; and that centres often acted as a catalyst for bringing people together providing a nucleation site to focus a range of research and training activities17.

Apart from ESRC the other six research councils all have some form of separate CASE scheme to support collaborative studentships with non-academic partners. NERC, the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC), the Medical Research Council (MRC) and the Science and Technology Facilities Council (STFC) jointly administer an iCASE competition for industrial CASE awards. All these types of award involve co-sponsorship between an academic and an industry partner with the latter being able to provide a strong steer on the topic to be studied. Students are expected to spend a significant amount of time working in and with the partner organisation.

Two research councils, NERC and MRC, also operate distinct though small funding strands to support studentships associated with large grants or programmes or funded institutes. In other cases such studentships are included as part of the overall research grant award.

17 EPSRC Mid Term Review, 2011
ESRC supports project-linked studentships on large and centre grants but not on standard research grants. NERC and BBSRC also operate additional, stand-alone studentship schemes targeted on specific priority areas where there is a recognised need to build capacity.

The questions for ESRC which arise from this comparison are:

- whether the current funding mechanisms are sufficiently flexible and direct to allow it to respond quickly and with agility to address new and emerging research issues or urgent skill gaps
- whether adopting the model of CDTs used by the other Councils would be a more effective way of fostering innovative interdisciplinary working than DTCs alone, especially in creating stronger collaborative working between the social sciences and the STEM disciplines (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics)
- whether additional and stand-alone funding mechanisms such as the CASE programme would be more successful than the current DTC model in engaging some types of non-academic partners, notably private sector employers
- but against this, whether adopting additional funding mechanisms would spread ESRC’s limited resources too thinly and risk giving very mixed messages to DTCs on the centrality of their role in training new cohorts of highly skilled social scientists.

We received a variety of views on the merits of adopting some of the funding routes used by the other research councils especially the use of CDTs.

'Should more be done to encourage links with other ESRC research investments, and RCUK training initiatives more broadly, particularly in the life sciences? Many of the new CDTS have strong 'societal' dimensions and implications, and this presents a valuable opportunity for innovative new interdisciplinary pathways.' Oxford DTC

'The increasingly challenge-based nature of the global research landscape demands an inherently interdisciplinary approach, and is one in which the social sciences have an essential role. Although there are emerging examples of interdisciplinary studentships being developed in cases where an institution holds a DTC from more than one research council, these are limited by variations in practices and DTC models across research councils, and, again, by the lack of flexibility and responsiveness of an exclusive DTC network delivery mechanism for PGRS support.' University of Portsmouth

Some DTCs were cautious about risking what had already been achieved through the DTC model pointing out the more transient nature of some themes:

'The ESRC should not be tempted to change the character of DTC training pathways in the new commissioning process. The pathways should remain disciplinary or interdisciplinary, rather than (say) thematic. Themes can fade in salience quite quickly, and will rarely match in a neat enough way the topic areas that strong PhD candidates look to or the research interests and achievements of sufficient numbers of supervisors, DTC module teachers or other university research staff engaged with DTCs. The flexibility to design training pathways which build on the strengths and aspirations of the universities and departments concerned, while also building interdisciplinary procedure and capacity to draw these together through a DTC, is a
real strength of the current DTC Network and is worth retaining.’ Warwick DTC Director

Non-DTC institutions felt that if ESRC was to go down the CDT route the EPSRC approach could be used as a model. It was felt that it might be easier to demonstrate research impact with the CDT model but that it was not necessarily the best structure for the long term building of skills, as themes can sometimes be short lived. It was felt that there should be a greater diversity of approaches and that, if ESRC did go down the CDT route, this should not be the only model. Having both themes and disciplines would be the key - even if this meant scaling down one aspect in order to provide a second.

The Regional Studies Association rightly cautions on the need to take an evidence- based view of the advantages and disadvantages of the different models for different contexts:

‘...there is significant variation within the RCUK landscape around DTCs, CDTs, DTPs and the like. The success of all these models needs to be looked at within their discipline and scientific context, and a good practice guide produced, to inform any attempts to vary the current ESRC network from its strong subject and discipline concern, by drawing comparisons from elsewhere.’

We were encouraged to hear that, whilst ESRC is considering the potential that CDTs may offer to create greater flexibility and interdisciplinarity, it does not intend to throw away the gains made in the last few years through the DTC model and does not intend to move over wholly to a CDT approach. It is felt that there is scope for CDTs to work in combination with DTCs.

In our view, whilst CDTs offer a feasible approach for addressing interdisciplinary issues both within and across councils, introducing this model is bound to have a significant effect on the funding available for existing DTCs – ESRC have no expectation that their overall budget will increase over the next few years. In these circumstances we do not believe it would be right to try to introduce CDTs in addition to the existing DTCs unless significant additional funding becomes available. We do, however, encourage the ESRC to explore whether there are options for co-funding a small number of CDTs with the other research councils. It should also be recognised that a number of the existing DTC institutions already have well developed interdisciplinary programmes which reach beyond the social sciences – such as that, for example, at Kings College, London where social science postgraduates work within schools of law, medicine and the arts and humanities as well as social science. This should be actively encouraged within the existing DTC approach.

**Stand-alone studentship funding**

The second major contrast between ESRC and the other research councils is the latter’s continued support for CASE models of funding separately from either DTPs or CDTs. The merits for the social sciences of (re)introducing such a scheme are discussed above and the unfavourable comparison drawn by many who commented should be noted:

‘…the ending of CASE studentships and their being ‘rolled into’ the DTC has certainly made it harder for us to sustain the kinds of collaborative links we had in the past’. Nottingham DTC
‘CASE studentships used to ensure greater collaboration with Knowledge Transfer and impact and did so in ways that guaranteed supervisory expertise and geographical relevance. The current structure has not made CASE studentships a requirement and they are currently lost to the system.’ University of Bournemouth

In our view ESRC should (re)consider the merits of introducing a CASE studentship variant although not at expense of the existing DTC system.

Other comparisons made between ESRC’s approach to training and that of other research councils included:

- The funding provided by some other councils towards the administrative costs of running the DTP networks. This was thought to limit the ability of DTCs to develop further internships and collaborative arrangements. Some degree of harmonisation across RCUK was called for.
- Similarly, it was noted that the administrative burdens of ESRC-funding appeared to be greater than for some other research councils. Some also welcomed the more ‘hands-off’ approach adopted by the AHRC compared to ESRC to the annual allocation of studentships to the various arts and humanities disciplines with decisions being made by each DTP and the AHRC taking no direct role in prioritising allocation to disciplines.

Conclusions and recommendations

The DTC network has only been in existence for a relatively short length of time and the first full cohort of students have yet to complete their courses. It is therefore too early to be able to draw very robust conclusions about its overall impact. Better metrics will need to be agreed to assess its longer term impact and the success of each DTC. The DTCs are, however, making good progress in improving the quality and flexibility of training, fostering greater interdisciplinarity, encouraging their students to be actively involved in the network and building a strong sense of a national cohort of highly-skilled and motivated social science researchers. The DTCs are using the new flexibilities in funding in innovative ways. The leveraging in of co-funding from the DTC members and some non-academic partners has been a significant achievement, helping to increase the total number of students benefiting from ESRC-funding.

There are, however, also significant issues still to address if the DTC model is to deliver a lasting improvement in the quality of postgraduate training in the UK social sciences: the Advanced Training network is not yet working as intended; more needs to be done to foster collaborations with the private sector; and, in our view, the boundaries created between those universities who are part of the DTC network and those who are not, are too impermeable, limiting the wider diffusion of the many positive benefits of the initiative.

Improving training and increasing flexibility

There is encouraging emerging evidence that the new DTC Network is being successful in equipping cohorts of social science postgraduates with excellent research and other key skills which will enable them to have an impact on the key economic and social questions of the present and in the future. It is beginning to have a significant effect on developing interdisciplinary training and the sharing of different types of expertise. Directors indicated
that their DTCs had opened up training regionally and across institutions. There was a consensus that the overall quality of teaching and training has increased.

Robust measurement of improvement is a challenge. It is still too early to assess change in outcomes, but there is good qualitative evidence of positive developments in DTCs where they have seized the opportunities offered by the new, more devolved approach to funding.

Student-led activities, especially the national first year and final year conferences, are also a very encouraging development which are doing much to enhance the student experience, strengthen their commitment, promote a greater exchange of knowledge, and help build a strong sense of being part of a national cohort of new social scientists.

### Advanced Training

The failure of the Advanced Training network to take off as a national and regional resource is due to a combination of different factors. There is much confusion about NCRM’s role as a clearing house for such courses and some dissatisfaction was expressed with its website. We were reassured to hear that the key players are aware of many of these problems and are actively addressing them. The Training and Skills Committee expects to develop a clearer definition of what constitutes advanced training. ESRC is currently in discussion with NCRM about the possibility of them taking on a formal co-ordination role. We endorse the need for these urgent remedial actions. The DTC Directors’ forum should also have a key role in ensuring that DTCs have a common understanding of the expectations for advanced training and the role of DTCs as training providers. There remain, however, questions of effective demand and supply which DTCs and non-DTCs should explore further. There also needs to be more collaboration between DTCs and non-DTCs in each region to ensure that institutions are able to achieve a better match of demand and supply.

We also endorse the view that virtual learning approaches should be more widely used across the DTC network than at present in order to reduce the problem of geographical accessibility but also, importantly, to make Advanced Training more easily available to ‘non-standard’ students who have difficulty accessing traditional forms of provision.

### Collaborations with non-academic partners

Steady progress has been made in developing collaborations with non-academic partners and there has been a substantial increase in these overall. Within this, however, it is of concern that the number of private sector collaborations has been falling. The economic downturn may be a major external reason for this trend but it is unclear whether ending the separate CASE programme has also contributed. We recommend that ESRC and the DTC network should explore whether a specific, well-branded and cohesive UK programme would help to reverse this decline. This could either be delivered through the DTC network or separately, though the latter option would probably be more costly to administer. There are lessons to learn from the other research councils. We also strongly support the initiatives being taken by some DTCs to have strategic advisory boards with representatives from the business, public and voluntary sectors as well as dedicated staff to organise collaborations.
ESRC has a definition of what constitutes a collaborative partnership but there remains some uncertainty (and possible misinterpretation) in practice\(^\text{18}\). We recommend ESRC ensures DTC Directors and their colleagues are reminded of this definition to ensure the 20 per cent target is understood and properly applied.

**International partnerships**

It is too early to comprehensively assess the overall success and impact of the pilot International PhD partnering scheme operated through the DTCs as many partnerships are at an early stage. Most DTCs responded very positively to the new opportunity, using the additional funds to initiate new links or enhance existing ones. Partnerships have been developed with 64 universities and research institutes in 27 countries. The scheme has made good progress towards developing reciprocal international institutional collaborations; supporting the development of an international cohort of early career researchers to operate in the global research environment; supporting the development of social science research capacity in new research-performing nations; and encouraging the development of intellectual networks to foster long term sustainable research collaboration.

**National Benchmarks and Priority Areas**

The introduction of DTCs and the new flexibilities in funding have enabled a significant increase in the total number of postgraduates benefiting from ESRC branded awards – a 19 per cent increase in the last three years. This is an important achievement in the context of ESRC’s reduced budget and reflects success in leveraging in co-funding from the DTC institutions\(^\text{19}\). Most disciplines have shared in this increase. However, the creation of the DTC Network and the identification of national benchmarks for disciplines has had no measurable effect on the shortage subjects of education, social anthropology or social work. Education in particular has seen a significant decline in ESRC awards. The position for the key priority shortage areas of economics, advanced quantitative methods, management and business studies, language based area studies and interdisciplinary studies is much more encouraging.

There is no simple or single solution to the shortfall in numbers of awards for the three disciplines experiencing decline or nil growth. It requires a variety of strategies. We welcome the fact that ESRC will soon be undertaking a further demographic review to explore the issue. We favour retaining steers on shortage disciplines and continuing with national monitoring benchmarks to ensure that DTCs continue to focus on this problem but as much, or more, is likely to be achieved through offering greater flexibility in rules and requirements around studentships (eg on entry requirements and modes of study) and ensuring courses are better adapted to the needs of ‘non-standard’ students and mid-career entrants who have competing family pressures. This is likely to be especially relevant for education and social work, where mid-career entry is significant, but is important for all disciplines. The forthcoming update of the demographic review should address this and make recommendations to ESRC and DTCs. There is also a connection here with our concerns over the present structure and composition of the DTC Network. The creation

\(^\text{18}\) To contribute to the 20 per cent target collaborations do not need to be co-funded, though there are clear benefits to securing co-funding. Collaborations must be with a non-academic organisation in the public, private or third sector. They must also include substantive knowledge exchange and not just one way engagement (eg data collection).

\(^\text{19}\) It should be noted, however, that much of this ‘leveraged’ co-funding appears to be coming from institutions’ own resources. This is likely to have an effect on the amount of QR funding available for other activities.
of more flexible training pathways, bridging DTCs and other institutions, could help to address the lack of growth in these two disciplines, notably those which have a strong presence in the post-1992 universities.

**Types of award: 1+3 and +3 models**

There is concern about the implications for widening access and participation of the fall in the number and proportion of 1+3 awards. There is a balance to be struck between, on the one hand, allowing DTCs sufficient autonomy to make their own decisions on the awards which will best suit the design of their pathways as well as the training needs of individual students and, on the other, ensuring that DTCs are not inadvertently creating barriers to access to postgraduate training for those students from disadvantaged backgrounds or those who have come through a non-standard route. We recommend that the TSC should review how effective active monitoring and the sharing of good practice is compared with a more directive approach using explicit targets and/or ring-fenced funding allocations for 1+3 awards. However this is best achieved, we believe the immediate objective should be to bring the 1+3 share back to at least the two-fifths level seen in 2011-2012 with the aim of then restoring the 50/50 balance seen in earlier years.

**Awarding studentships**

Different DTCs have very different approaches to allocating the studentships within their organisation. Some have a completely open competition with no pre-determined quotas for specific pathways or constituent institutions. Others hold an open competition for a proportion of the studentships but have pre-set minimum quotas for individual pathways and/or member institutions in the case of consortia. Both approaches have their merits and their advocates.

We recommend that, consistent with devolving more responsibility and decision making to DTCs, the right balance between studentships awarded through an open competition across all pathways and those allocated according to quotas should be for the DTCs themselves to decide. The key consideration should continue to be recognising and rewarding excellence. However, a very static model of allocation, with no mechanisms for change or for encouraging interdisciplinary studentships, is not desirable.

**Common deadlines for applications and decisions on studentships**

There is a virtually unanimous view that there should be a uniform closing date for applications and decision dates for studentship awards across the DTC network. The current un-coordinated system of different dates for different DTCs has led to significant problems and inefficiencies. We fully support this view and recommend that the DTC Directors, in consultation with the ESRC, should agree a common deadline but taking some account of deadlines set by leading universities in other countries where there is intense international competition for the best candidates.

**Structures and funding**

The concentration of ESRC’s postgraduate research funding into 21 DTCs comprising 12 individual institutions and nine consortia, including 46 institutions in total, was an

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20 It should be noted that prior to 2011-12 there was a more or less equal split between the numbers of 1+3 and +3 awards.
understandable response to developing excellence and achieving the necessary critical mass in the face of significant overall reductions in the Council's budget. Simply continuing to spread the available funding ever more thinly over a large number of outlets would have been a costly and unstrategic response which may have led to the dilution rather than the enhancement of the quality and impact of social science research training. There are also many positive benefits to focusing resources in a way which provides students with a comprehensive, broad-based grounding in research skills and knowledge.

However, the new structure which has emerged is even more concentrated than ESRC and the Training and Development Board originally envisaged or intended with none of the planned Doctoral Training Units being commissioned. Additional funding cuts during the commissioning process meant that an even higher quality threshold was applied and all the DTU applicants and some DTC applicants fell below this new line. This further concentration and in particular the loss of the planned DTU has, we believe, had some less desirable effects which do not best serve the longer term objective of building a strong, influential and responsive social science base across the UK.

We are concerned that the new structure which has actually emerged is a very strongly two-tier one with relatively impermeable boundaries and that these boundaries are likely to become even more fixed over time as existing DTCs develop and consolidate their roles. For those institutions outside the DTC network the barriers to entry now appear very formidable and discouraging.

Strong representations have been made that the new structure ignores or undervalues the smaller centres of excellence which are to be found in institutions outside the DTC network. These are often innovative, interdisciplinary and headed by leading experts in their fields but are too small to sustain a whole DTC. It has been pointed out that some of these achieved RAE scores equivalent to or higher than departments which are now part of some DTCs. Others, including the TSC, dispute this argument and feel that is overstated with the number of truly excellent centres outside the DTC network being very small and often dependent on just one or two individual experts.

Whatever the true extent and quality of such centres of excellence, where they exist, especially where indicated in the results of the REF, we recommend that future DTC commissioning exercises should allow for and encourage their inclusion as part of consortia bids. It is important for the future development of the social sciences and for cross-disciplinary and cross-council initiatives that the boundaries between DTCs and other HEIs should become more flexible and permeable than they currently are. One way of doing this, whilst retaining the many strengths of the DTC model, would be to encourage DTCs to collaborate on delivering pathways provided jointly by departments or units both inside and outside the DTC in cases where high quality training and expertise on a specific topic is found beyond the DTC itself.

DTCs should identify centres of excellence and additional pathways outside of the core DTC structure and include them in DTC provision where such new pathways will strengthen DTC provision. The main advantages of such flexibility are that it would make better use of the skills and expertise available across the social sciences as a whole, would foster innovation and change within and beyond the DTC network and give non-DTCs a realistic incentive to raise standards so that they could in due course become full members of a DTC. Such an approach might also have the additional benefit of widening access to
high quality postgraduate training within regions and for those following 'non-standard' routes into postgraduate studies.

**Relationship between DTCs and CDTs**

ESRC is considering the potential that CDTs may offer for fostering greater flexibility and interdisciplinarity but does not intend to move over wholly to a CDT approach. In our view, whilst CDTs offer a feasible approach for addressing interdisciplinary issues both within and across councils, introducing this model now would inevitably have a significant effect on the funding available for existing DTCs – ESRC have no expectation that their overall budget will increase over the next few years. In these circumstances we do not believe it would be right to try to introduce CDTs in addition to the existing DTCs unless significant additional funding becomes available. We do, however, encourage the ESRC to explore whether there are options for co-funding a small number of CDTs with the other research councils. It should also be recognised that some DTC institutions already have well developed interdisciplinary postgraduate programmes which reach beyond the social sciences. These should be actively encouraged within the existing DTC approach.

**Achieving critical mass: consortia or single institution DTCs?**

DTCs must be able to provide a sufficient critical mass of staff and students and a range of pathways and breadth of training to ensure students receive a strong grounding in social science research. In our view it is too early to conclude that consortia DTCs as such are necessarily the optimal model though some single institution DTCs may be too small to provide the critical mass of training and opportunities required or to build a strong student cohort effect.

For future rounds small single institutions (ie those with small numbers of social science postgraduates) should consider forming partnerships with other institutions in the same region. But we also agree that looser federations between DTCs in the same broad region could offer many of the benefits of networking without all the administrative costs and complexities of full consortia. We do not favour a move to exclusively consortia DTCs in the next round of commissioning – the key question should be whether a proposed DTC will be able to provide the range and quality of training experiences required, not its organisational composition.

**Recommissioning**

The existing DTCs and especially the consortia have invested a good deal of time and resources into making the new centres work. Developing strong collaborations between different institutions has required much patient work. For these reasons a number of existing DTCs have argued that the recommissioning process should be 'light touch' so as to avoid wasting or undervaluing the substantial inputs already made. Whilst this argument is understandable we do not support it and believe that, for reasons of fairness and to ensure continuing high quality, the commissioning process for the next round must be fully open to all institutions and fully transparent. It is vital that other institutions should be able to enter the field where they can demonstrate quality and excellence in research and research training. Where existing DTCs have put a great deal of time, thought and energy into making their centre work this is likely to be evident in the quality of their bid.
In preparation for the next commissioning round we recommend that ESRC should hold workshops for potential bidders to give them a greater awareness of what is involved in setting up and running a DTC, especially a consortium, and some of the lessons learnt from the first round. In the first round many DTCs underestimated the time and resources needed to resolve the internal administrative processes, especially aligning the systems of different institutions. Lessons have also been learnt about the key role of a DTC Director who has the time and authority to implement change as well as about the importance of having clear information flows for students and supervisors. Whilst existing DTCs are likely to be sensitive about sharing information which might confer a competitive advantage on others we believe that it would be possible to provide useful generic messages which would lead to more realistic bids and expectations about costs and the resources required.

It is very clear from the evidence we have considered that a key ingredient for the success of a DTC is having strong, strategic and properly resourced leadership. The TSC rightly attach a high priority to this. We therefore strongly recommend that bidders for DTC status in the recommissioning round should be required to provide clear and costed proposals on how the DTC will be managed, especially the provision made for a Director post. Strategic management boards should also be actively encouraged – they can provide longer term direction for the DTC as well as ensuring it has the support and involvement of a wide range of interests, academic and non-academic.

**Networking and sharing experience**

The twice yearly meetings between ESRC and DTC Directors are to be welcomed in helping to resolve problems early and to build the sense of a collective endeavour to improve the quality of social science training. Building on this we recommend that wider networking between DTCs both regionally and nationally should be fostered in order to share best practice and find solutions to emerging issues. It is important that DTCs feel ownership and control of these meetings rather than seeing them primarily as ‘top-down’ events led by the ESRC. ESRC should reconsider the role it plays in these meetings. ESRC should have a role in encouraging and facilitating this networking but we believe the DTCs should take the prime responsibility for developing and maintaining such links.

There is also a need for greater, more frequent networking and collaboration at regional level between DTCs and non-DTC institutions involved in postgraduate social science training. This is important if the worst effects of a ‘two-tier’ system are to be avoided. We found very limited evidence of such links at present. This is particularly relevant to improving the functioning of the Advanced Training network and the potential inclusion of centres of excellence located in non-DTC institutions.

Whilst DTC Directors should continue to have the lead responsibility for communications across the DTC, networking should not be limited to Directors alone. It should also involve, for example, senior representatives from non-lead institutions in consortia as well as representatives of any other ‘non-core’ institutions which provide training for specific pathways. We also recommend creating a network (possibly a virtual one) for DTC administrators to share good practice on aligning and simplifying different systems. Whilst there will always be an element of healthy competition between DTCs we believe there is much to be gained by sharing practical experience, training and other elements.
ESRC Recognition exercise

The ending of the process whereby ESRC gave formal recognition to social science departments reaching a high standard of quality is much regretted by those institutions which have no ESRC studentships. Even where they did not previously receive funding for postgraduate studentships the ESRC ‘kite-mark’ was seen to have considerable value to the institution. It has been argued that it helped them attract other types of research funding as well as high quality students. On the other hand, running the recognition exercise was a costly and labour intensive process for ESRC and for independent referees. The benefits were difficult to quantify. Its value as an effective guarantee of quality is also questionable as the exercise could only be undertaken infrequently. Given the constraints on ESRC’s budget, we accept that providing a universal recognition exercise across institutions irrespective of whether they receive ESRC-funding can no longer be a priority. Other metrics such as REF scores can provide potential funders and students with an indication of an institution’s or a department’s overall quality and reputation.

Reducing bureaucracy

ESRC’s decision to devolve as much responsibility and decision making to DTCs is the right one. To a large degree this is happening in practice but we also heard of several instances where DTCs still had to (or at least felt that they had to) seek ESRC’s permission for apparently minor changes. In some cases the problem is that DTCs are not themselves clear when permission needs to be sought or decisions approved. We recommend that ESRC, in consultation with DTC Directors and administrators, undertakes a light touch review of its own administrative processes to ensure that it really is minimising the number of instances where DTCs have to seek ESRC approval or endorsement for decisions which are best made by DTCs themselves. This may entail providing greater clarity about the few key decisions that must be referred to ESRC rather than changing the procedures as such. ESRC should also review critically the level of detailed information it requires from DTCs for monitoring and accountability purposes. Such information should only be requested where it has a clear and essential purpose and will be actively used. The agreement of a clear set of output and outcome criteria for evaluating success (see below) will help in specifying which data it is essential for the DTCs to provide to the ESRC.

Evaluating impact and success

The fact that the DTC Network is still at a relatively early stage has made it difficult to draw robust conclusions about its overall success or to evaluate how well individual DTCs are performing. ESRC does collect annual monitoring data and conducts annual visits but we recommend that an explicit set of output and outcome criteria is agreed by ESRC with the DTC Network to ensure that all parties, including institutions which are not yet part of a DTC, are clear in advance on how success is being assessed, using quantifiable measures wherever possible. These should be put in place as soon as possible and in advance of the recommissioning process. A suggested list of evaluation criteria and measures is attached at Annex 7.
Annex 1: Terms of Reference

Purpose of the review

The principal aims of the review are as follows:

- to provide assurance that aims and objectives of the DTC network are being realised
- to assess the overall performance and impact of the DTC network (including value for money)
- to identify lessons learned from the commissioning and management of the DTC network to inform future exercises
- to identify any additional factors that will inform the re-commissioning of the DTC network in 2016.

Terms of reference

- The evaluation will be overseen by the ESRC's Evaluation Committee and will be conducted by an independent Review Panel.
- The Review Panel will number approximately seven members, including the Panel Chair. It will contain representation from a number of social science disciplines, individuals with expertise in postgraduate training, research users and potentially members with experience in postgraduate training overseas and with other research funders. In addition, membership will be drawn from Research Organisations that both do and do not currently host or collaborate with existing DTCs. No Panel member will be allowed to provide any assessment on a DTC hosted by an RO that they have an affiliation with.
- The Panel's report will be submitted to the ESRC Evaluation Committee in September 2014. Following acceptance by the Evaluation Committee, the report will be presented to the ESRC TSC.
- The Review Panel will:
  - assess the extent to which the DTC network met its core objectives in terms of providing:
    - excellent core, advanced scientific and transferrable economic and societal impact related skills training across the range of social science disciplines;
    - innovative interdisciplin ary training;
    - flexibility in the content, structure and delivery of training as well as in the use of studentship funding;
    - a more integrated approach to training within institutions and consortia, pooling expertise and reducing duplication. Supporting development of a strategic vision for the social sciences within the institution or consortium
    - collaborative research and training opportunities for students within the private, public and voluntary sector.
- Assess the opening up of Advanced Training both within and outside the DTC network.
- Assess ‘added’ developments that DTCs have been encouraged to take on for example, the development of international PhD partnering activities.
- Review the success (where appropriate) of collaborative DTCs.
• Assess the extent to which the DTC network is developing capacity to help address the ESRC Strategic Priorities, broader challenges across the social sciences, and is engaging with other ESRC research and resource investments.

• Draw comparisons with other research councils (being mindful of the need for harmonisation across council activities) and other research training funders overseas.

• Assess the extent to which DTC status has resulted in additional developments within host institutions, for example infrastructure development, or extension of the DTC model across the institution.

• Identify overall lessons learned from the current DTC model, including both strengths and weaknesses
  o inform the design of the next round of network commissioning, and the call specification as appropriate.

• This evidence will then be used to inform the commissioning of the next network of DTCs.
Annex 2: Membership of the Review Committee

Mr Richard Bartholomew (Chair)  Independent research consultant
Professor Richard Disney    Economics, IFS/University of Sussex
Dr Joe Eyerman              Research Methodology, RDI International, USA
Professor Jennifer Mason    Sociology, University of Manchester
Professor Steve Newstead    Psychology, University of Plymouth
Professor Harry Torrance    Education, Manchester Metropolitan University
Dr Rebekah Widdowfield      Scottish Government

* All members of the committee undertook this review in their personal capacities. Views and opinions expressed in the report do not necessarily reflect those of their employing organisations or disciplines.
Annex 3: Structure of the review and contributors

The review consisted of group discussions with a representative\textsuperscript{21} cross-section of organisations with experiences of and/or an interest in the DTC Network. Participating organisations were selected in order to provide reasonable coverage of different types of DTCs (single institution and consortia), different types of universities (both pre- and post-1992) and coverage of different regions and UK countries\textsuperscript{22}. Care was also taken to ensure that participants in the oral evidence sessions came from a wide range of social science disciplines. ESRC officials and members of the ESRC TSC were also interviewed. Institutions not included in the oral evidence sessions were invited to submit written evidence – nine DTCs and 22 non-DTC institutions did so. All learned societies and related bodies in the social sciences were invited to submit written evidence – 16 did so. Details are given below of those who submitted evidence. In addition a range of existing data provided by DTCs and ESRC was considered together with annual reports from each DTC. Other research council reports and existing research evidence on the DTC Network were also consulted.

**Oral evidence sessions**

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<tr>
<th>Type of participant</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
<th>Institutions attending</th>
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<tr>
<td>DTC Non-lead institutions</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Lancaster (North West Consortium), Stirling (Scottish Consortium), Kent (South East Consortium), Aberystwyth (Wales Consortium)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Supervisors</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Glasgow (Scottish Consortium), Bath (South West Consortium), Sheffield (White Rose Consortium), Cardiff (Wales Consortium)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students in DTCs</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Glasgow (Scottish Consortium), Strathclyde (Scottish Consortium)</td>
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\textsuperscript{21} The sample of organisations invited was a purposive sample designed to provide good coverage of different types of organisations, roles and experiences. It was not designed to be a statistically representative sample.

\textsuperscript{22} The oral evidence sessions included organisations from Scotland, Wales and England. Two universities in Northern Ireland submitted written evidence.
Non DTC institutions 8

Cranfield University
Keele University
University of the West of England
Brunel University
University of Leicester
University of East Anglia
University of Brighton
Northumbria University

Members of ESRC Training and Skills Committee 3

Chair
Vice-Chair
Former Vice-Chair

ESRC senior officials 2

Deputy Director of Research, Partnerships and International Directorate
Head of Skills and Methods

Non-academic collaborators (telephone interviews) 5

BBC CBeebies
Danone Ltd
Scottish Government
Sheffield City Council
Skills Development Scotland

Written submissions were received from the following organisations:

Written submissions

DTCs

Essex DTC
Kings College, London DTC
North East DTC
Nottingham DTC
Oxford DTC
South East DTC
Southampton DTC

Non DTC universities

Anglia Ruskin
Aston
Bath Spa
Birmingham City
Bournemouth
Bolton
Brighton
Brunel
Chester
City
Cranfield
East Anglia
Hertfordshire
Leeds Beckett
London South Bank
Open University
Plymouth
Portsmouth
Queens University, Belfast
Sunderland
Ulster
York St Johns

Learned societies and related bodies

Academy of Social Sciences (AcSS)
Association for Psychosocial Studies (APS)
Association of Social Anthropologists (ASA)
British Academy of Management (BAM)
British Educational Research Association (BERA)
British Psychological Society (BPS)
British Sociological Association and Heads and Professors of Sociology (BSA-HaPS)
Economic History Society (EHS)
Joint Universities Council – Social Work Education Research Sub-Committee (JUCSWEC)
Media, Communications and Cultural Studies Association (MeCCSA)
Regional Studies Association (RSA)
Research and Enterprise Network for Universities (RENU)
Royal Economic Society and Conference of Heads of University Departments of Economics (RES and CHUDE)
Royal Geographical Society and Institute of British Geographers (RGS-IBG)
Royal Statistical Society (RSS)
Social Policy Association (SPA)
Annex 4: Statistics on ESRC-funded studentship numbers by discipline and comparison with national benchmarks

New studentships in DTCs by discipline 2009-2010 to 2013-2014

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<td><strong>753</strong></td>
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Source: ESRC

Comparison of ESRC studentship allocations against National Benchmarks for disciplines 2011-2013

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<th>2012</th>
<th>2011</th>
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<td><strong>3</strong></td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>Management and business studies</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental planning</td>
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<td>12</td>
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<td>Politics and international relations</td>
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<td>Science and technology studies</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Social work</td>
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<td>18</td>
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<td>Socio-legal studies</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociology</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stats, methods and computing</td>
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<td>Interdisciplinary</td>
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Source: ESRC
Annex 5: Number of first year higher degree social science students by JACs* principal subject

All HEIs 2010-2011 to 2012-2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal Subject</th>
<th>2010-2011</th>
<th>2011-2012</th>
<th>2012-2013</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>1,440</td>
<td>1,455</td>
<td>1,525</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>470</td>
<td>480</td>
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<tr>
<td>Politics</td>
<td>755</td>
<td>735</td>
<td>695</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sociology</td>
<td>595</td>
<td>650</td>
<td>650</td>
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<td>Social policy</td>
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<td>380</td>
<td>310</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social work</td>
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<td>175</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthropology</td>
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<td>230</td>
<td>280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human and social geography</td>
<td>290</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development studies**</td>
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<td></td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others in social studies</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>155</td>
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<tr>
<td>Business studies</td>
<td>855</td>
<td>865</td>
<td>795</td>
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<td>Management studies</td>
<td>640</td>
<td>625</td>
<td>655</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linguistics</td>
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<td>Education</td>
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<td>1,580</td>
<td>1,470</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>7,750</strong></td>
<td><strong>7,910</strong></td>
<td><strong>7,820</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (Higher Education Database for Institutions)

* Joint Academic Coding System (JACs)

**Development studies category part of ‘Others in social studies’ before 2012-2013
## Annex 6: Comparison of research council funding routes for postgraduate training

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of funding</th>
<th>ESRC</th>
<th>AHRC</th>
<th>BBSRC</th>
<th>EPSRC</th>
<th>NERC</th>
<th>MRC</th>
<th>STFC</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Doctoral Training Partnerships or Centres: cover the full range of subjects or disciplines, not themed. Consortia or single institution</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>495</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>1200</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>c.45%</td>
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<td>Centres for Doctoral Training: focused on specific themes, priority areas, or skill priority gaps</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>700</td>
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<tr>
<td>CASE or similar studentships: individual studentships involving collaboration with and funding from non-academic partners</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
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<td>50</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>30-35</td>
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<td>Studentships associated with large grants or funded units</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>30</td>
<td>c.35%</td>
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<td>Other stand-alone studentships, often targeted on priority issues or skill areas</td>
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</table>

Key: X = has this form of funding. Numbers indicate approximate number of studentships awarded each year, where known.
Annex 7: Proposed evaluation criteria for DTCs

Principles

- ‘Forward’ indicators as well as lagging indicators.
- Need to be explicit as to what these indicators are well in advance of recommissioning.

Suggested criteria

- Drop-out rates.
- Completion rates.
- Measures of student experience and satisfaction.
- Measures of access and participation by disadvantaged and students following non-standard routes into postgraduate study.
- Employment rates (one-year?) after completion by type of employment, and whether related to training.
- REF outcomes – potentially re-weighted to give greater weight to ‘research environment’ and ‘impact’.
- Extent of co-funding and/or collaborations with non-academic organisations, and by sector.
- Effectiveness of managerial and organisational structure.
- Volume and delivery of advanced training and extent of access by:
  - DTC students
  - non-DTC students.
- Number and quality of interdisciplinary initiatives – across and beyond the social sciences, including participation in cross-council initiatives.