

Pathways to Excellence: ESRC Postgraduate Training Framework

Introduction and Summary

This document explains the background to the ESRC's accreditation decisions and sets out the process by which the ESRC's new Doctoral Training Framework was established.

The Framework was conceived in a very different fiscal and policy climate. The recent Comprehensive Spending Review has led to an overall reduction in real terms of 12% in the ESRC's budget, which has led the Council to make cutbacks across much of its portfolio. For postgraduate training these cutbacks have resulted in a drop in the annual studentship allocation from around 750 to 600 awards, or 20% per annum. The policy context has also evolved with the recent Smith Review¹ of postgraduate training calling for a much more targeted approach to postgraduate provision, focussed more on centres of research excellence.

Against this backdrop, the Council has established a national network of 21 accredited Doctoral Training Centres which will fulfil the core aim of the new Framework to deliver truly excellent postgraduate training provision. This excellence exists across the Centres and is founded on a research base that comprises the full disciplinary range of the social sciences including ESRC priority areas as well as areas of interdisciplinary research. Accredited institutions and consortia have provided clear evidence of high quality in their proposed training provision and have also shown a willingness to innovate both in its content and structure. In doing so they are making full use of the flexibility afforded by the new Framework. There is a diverse range of excellent advanced training being offered both to students at accredited DTCs and outside of the network, including training in quantitative research methods. The network also demonstrates a clear engagement with the principle of embedding transferable skills training, offering both innovative methods of ensuring researcher development and novel opportunities for postgraduate researchers to gain experience of working with user groups through a series of people-exchange initiatives. Finally, the network is built on a series of innovative and purposeful collaborations, between institutions in the shared design and delivery of excellent core and advanced training, and between the DTCs and a wide range of public, private and third sector organisations.

Background and Objectives

In spring 2009, after a year of review and consultation, the ESRC took the decision to introduce a new Postgraduate Training Framework. The main objective of the 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 the ESRC away from the previous system of accrediting individual training courses and outlets at an institutional level.

The new Framework is focussed 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 reserved only for those able to demonstrate the ability to deliver the very best postgraduate training in social science disciplines and/or areas of interdisciplinary

¹ Professor Adrian Smith, *One Step Beyond: Making the Most of Postgraduate Education*, www.bis.gov.uk/one-step-beyond

enquiry within a strong research environment which can support a critical mass of postgraduate students. Applicants have been expected to demonstrate this quality in the delivery of core, advanced and transferable skills training, and in the development of a strategic vision for the social sciences within the institution or consortium.

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 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 focussed on the seven ESRC Strategic Challenges.

Throughout the accreditation process the Council has adhered to these original objectives and principles of the new postgraduate training framework.

Accreditation Process

In March 2010 57 applications for accreditation were received by the ESRC, 29 for Doctoral Training Centres (DTCs) and 28 for Doctoral Training Units (DTUs). In total the applications covered 98 institutions and included 16 consortia bids. Each application was subject to a peer review process following standard ESRC commissioning practice. This process was overseen by the ESRC Training and Skills Committee (TSC), comprised of senior social scientists and user experts with broad experience of postgraduate research training. This Committee was bound by ESRC's Code of Practice to observe the highest standards of impartiality, integrity and objectivity. The accreditation process was as follows:

- All applications were assessed first by seven members of a specially constituted peer review college made up of both academics and users, including members nominated by Learned Societies and institutions. Members needed to demonstrate a broad social science view and have substantial experience in the provision of high quality postgraduate research training.
- After the peer review stage, all applicants had the right to reply to the peer reviewers' comments.
- Each application was then assessed by two members of the Training and Development Board (now the TSC) who took into account all peer review comments and responses from applicants.
- Applications were then discussed in detail at the July 2010 meeting of the TSC and DTC/DTU accreditation decisions taken.

Accreditation Review

The ESRC Postgraduate Training Framework was conceived in a very different fiscal and policy environment from the position faced by the Council in the summer of 2010, with the growing likelihood of a tough financial settlement as a result of the Government's Spending Review. Consequently, as part of a wider review of ESRC investments, it was decided in late July 2010 to review the accreditation decisions taken by the TSC and delay

making a final decision on the scale and shape of the DTC/DTU network until the ESRC budget allocation was known. It was crucial to ensure that within a tighter funding environment the new doctoral training network was sustainable. This decision was also taken against the broader context of the recent review of Postgraduate Education² by Professor Adrian Smith which had recommended that to get best value from limited resources, funding for postgraduate training should be targeted at areas of excellence, locating research students in high quality environments where world leading research is taking place.

The new policy and funding environment prompted the ESRC to reconsider its national training role. When Council met in October 2010 it agreed:

- To adopt a more focused strategy in order to establish a sustainable network;
- Given this more focussed strategy, to raise the threshold for accreditation;
- To phase out accreditation and move instead to a streamlined monitoring system, aligned more closely with that of other Research Councils;
- To focus resources through the quota allocation and discontinue the studentship competitions.

A subgroup of the TSC was established to reconsider framework applications in this new context. Due to the raised threshold and the changed context, only 23 DTCs originally recommended for accreditation were reviewed by the subgroup. All of the DTU applications were below the revised threshold so they were not considered. The remit of this subgroup was to review and then rank the remaining 23 DTC applications, focussing on key areas in the original objectives of the Framework. It did not engage in any fundamental re-assessment of applications. The key areas that were considered were:

- The provision of excellent training in ESRC priority areas (Language Based Area Studies, Economics, Education, Management and Business Studies, Social Work, Empirical Studies in Law and Quantitative Methods);
- The provision of excellent interdisciplinary training designed to tackle ESRC Strategic Challenges;
- The provision of high quality advanced training courses;
- The provision of excellent transferable skills training and extent of collaborative links with users.

Several applicants were also asked to respond to specific queries raised by the TSC in July 2010 or to provide more information in order to inform the subgroup members' decisions. No applicants were allowed to alter their original application in any way and it was made clear that all responses had to be limited to the specific questions asked.

Following this ranking exercise, the ESRC received its budget settlement from the Department for Business Innovation and Skills in late December 2010. The overall settlement represents a 12% cut in real-terms to the Council budget. This has resulted in cutbacks across much of the Council's portfolio and for postgraduate training a reduction in the studentship allocation from around 750 to 600 a year, a drop of roughly 20%. On the basis of this annual allocation, the final number of DTCs accredited was then determined with the aim of ensuring critical mass across the network. The network will now be made up of 21 DTCs.

Allocation of studentships to DTCs

² Professor Adrian Smith, *One Step Beyond: Making the Most of Postgraduate Education*, www.bis.gov.uk/one-step-beyond.

All successful DTCs have now been allocated an annual quota of studentships which has been set for the five year accreditation period, subject to a review after three years. The final calculations were based on an allocation mechanism which utilised an algorithm and further strategic supplement. In line with the original objectives of the framework *Guidelines*, the key aims of this mechanism have been to:

- maintain the health of all social science disciplines;
- maintain and build capacity in priority areas and interdisciplinary research;
- build capacity in quantitative methods training;
- recognise successful collaboration.

The total number of studentships allocated across the DTCs has been 600 per year. The majority of awards (70%) were allocated to DTCs through the algorithm which was based on both quality and quantity variables.³ The remaining awards were then allocated by the ESRC based on the considerations outlined above.

DTCs have been given a large amount of flexibility to distribute their studentships using internal allocation mechanisms. This is because the ESRC is keen for the primary driver behind this process to be excellence both in terms of individual students and of the pathways onto which the students are placed. However, in order to offer some direction as to the distribution of studentships across the network, the ESRC has established disciplinary benchmarks adjusted to place greater focus on the Council's priority areas. In addition to the national benchmarks the ESRC has also applied a more prescriptive steer in these priority areas to ensure that capacity is built and the benchmark set is reached. DTCs highlighted by the peer review process as strong in a priority area will be required to allocate a set proportion of their allocation to the pathway(s) in that discipline.

As noted in the original *Guidelines*, the ESRC is also keen to encourage DTCs to develop innovative methods of collaborative training and as a result is stipulating that 20% of each DTC's allocation should be delivered in collaboration with a public, private or third sector organisation. Finally, in line with the ESRC's aim to improve capacity in quantitative methods training, a benchmark of 10% has been set as the proportion of all awards which should have a strong focus on advanced quantitative methods.

Now that all applicants have been informed of the accreditation and allocation decisions, the ESRC is compiling a complete list of accredited institutions, pathways and studentship awards which will be published on the ESRC website in the week commencing 31 January 2011.

The New Doctoral Training Network

The new DTC network will meet the original objectives and principles of the Postgraduate Training Framework. It will satisfy the core aim of the new Framework to deliver truly excellent postgraduate training provision right across the UK social science research base.

Clearly the new fiscal environment in which the ESRC is operating has had an effect on the size of network. The raised threshold means that no DTUs have been accredited. This does not mean that no excellent training exists in those institutions that submitted DTU applications, or indeed does not exist more generally outside the accredited network of DTCs. However, to meet the constraints of the fiscal settlement, decisions had to be based on the overall quality of the application, on ensuring a critical mass of students in successful institutions/consortia, and on the ability to deliver the ESRC's strategic objectives. Nevertheless, the ESRC encourages all unsuccessful applicants to continue to develop their pathways and so further enrich the provision of training in the social sciences in the UK.

³ The variables for the algorithm are the product of FTE social science staff numbers, % 3*/4* RAE output, % 3*/4* RAE environment, ESRC research income and % excellent (5/6 or 6/6) peer review grades. Allocation=FTE Cat. A Staff x (RAE output x RAE environment x $[ESRC\ income]^{0.5} \times peer\ review\ assessment\ variable$)

Next Steps

At this stage it is expected that a future competition for DTC status will be held in 2015. However, in line with the practice in other Research Councils, this will not be another full accreditation exercise. It will be possible for accredited DTCs to apply for new pathways to be included in their DTC at the annual reporting stage but there will be no interim accreditation exercise as originally anticipated.

Discussions with accredited DTCs will be held over the coming months and institutions will receive further information relating to the implementation of the new Doctoral Training network. This will include discussions about opening up advanced training provided through the Doctoral Training network as well as the sharing of best practice on knowledge exchange and transferable skills training. The 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 and Researcher Development Initiative. In line with a key objective of the Framework, the aim is then for as many students as possible from all institutions to have access to a wider range of advanced training and development opportunities.

For further information on any issue relating to the postgraduate training framework please contact pgtframework@esrc.ac.uk in the first instance.