

# ESRC Postgraduate Training Framework

## Frequently Asked Questions

### Please note that this is an evolving document

It reflects some of the initial questions following the commissioning process but has been supplemented with further questions as they arise. Please note that the version of this document in which a question first appeared is recorded after each question.

| <b>Version tracker<sup>1</sup></b> |                            |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| <b>Date</b>                        | <b>Amendment/ Addition</b> |
| January 2011                       | Version 1                  |
| March 2011                         | Version 2                  |

In reading this document you may also find it useful to refer to the *ESRC Postgraduate Training and Development Guidelines 2009*. This is available at: <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/funding-and-guidance/guidance/postgraduates/ptframework.aspx>

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<sup>1</sup> Please note that the version of this document in which a question first appeared is recorded after each question.

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## Development of the Framework

**1. Why is the Council no longer able to maintain a national accreditation system?** (Version 1)

The ESRC spending review settlement, although better than expected, represents a cut of 12 per cent to the Council's budget and therefore presents a real challenge and we now have to focus our more limited resources on those institutions best able to contribute to the ESRC strategic objectives. For postgraduate training these cutbacks have resulted in a drop in the annual studentship allocation from around 750 to 600 awards, or 20 per cent per annum. The policy context has also evolved with the recent Smith Review<sup>2</sup> of postgraduate training calling for a much more targeted approach to postgraduate provision, focussed more on centres of research excellence.

Our Council therefore took the decision that we should develop a more focussed strategy for supporting postgraduate training. Our expectations of institutions under the ESRC Postgraduate Framework are very high and to realise the ambitions set out in the Framework it is essential that we have sufficient resources to support the development of the network. We therefore revisited the threshold for accreditation and only considered accrediting institutions/consortia which demonstrated true excellence and contribute to our strategic objectives. The peer review process highlighted a clear quality gap between DTC and DTU applications and all DTU's fell below the revised threshold for accreditation. This is not to say that there were not excellent elements in these bids, but overall the quality of the DTU applications was not as strong as DTC applications.

**2. Will any DTCs be accredited but not receive studentships?** (Version 1)

No. We will no longer be able to maintain a national accreditation system and so will be focussing our resources on supporting DTCs with a critical mass of ESRC students.

**3. What constitutes a critical mass of students, and why is it necessary for DTCs to have this?** (Version 1)

We believe the average DTC will need a minimum critical mass of around 45 ESRC studentships at any time. (ie a minimum of three overlapping cohorts of 15 studentships). The student experience is likely to be better at institutions with a larger cohort of students, offering a research environment of the highest quality. If a DTC has a small number of studentships per year we will weaken the leverage we have over institutions and undermine our aim to drive up standards.

**4. Institutions were given the option to apply as a DTC or DTU. Institutions that applied for DTU status will not now be able to receive studentships through a competition. How can the changes in the commissioning process be explained?** (Version 1)

We appreciate that significant work went into developing applications; however the final decision on whether to apply for DTC or DTU status lay with the applicant. The ESRC only provided advice based on the information provided to them by institutions and the different expectations for DTCs and DTUs. As outlined in the response to Question 1 the decision not to accredit DTU's was based on the fact that they were deemed to fall below the revised quality

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<sup>2</sup> Professor Adrian Smith, *One Step Beyond: Making the Most of Postgraduate Education*, [www.bis.gov.uk/one-step-beyond](http://www.bis.gov.uk/one-step-beyond).

threshold. If any DTUs had passed the revised threshold for accreditation they would have formed part of the new doctoral training network and we would have allocated them students.

**5. Why did DTU applicants not get the opportunity to revise their applications, or consider applying for DTC status? (Version 1)**

No new criteria were used for the further review of proposals. Rather, the threshold for accreditation was raised and further emphasis was placed on the strategic contribution an application would make to ESRC stated priorities.

**6. Does the difference in quality between DTUs and DTCs indicate that two different methods / approaches were used to review the DTCs and DTUs? (Version 1)**

No. All applications underwent a robust peer review process, as per the standard procedures followed by the ESRC; firstly review by a specially constituted peer review college, then the opportunity for applicants to respond to those reviewer comments. The applications were then discussed and assessed by the ESRC Training and Skills Committee, (formerly the Training and Development Board) in July 2010. Support and guidance was made available to peer reviewers and assessors, who were advised that successful DTCs and DTUs were expected to display the same level of excellence in training, with the distinguishing factor between a DTC and DTU being the breadth of provision available. It was explicitly stated in the Guidelines for Reviewers and Assessors and Workshop event for Peer Reviewers that reviewing of DTCs and DTUs should be consistent.

**7. Is the ESRC now saying that ‘pockets of excellence’ do not exist outside the accredited network of DTCs? (Version 1)**

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, overall the DTU applications were not seen to be as strong as the DTC applications.

**8. Without a national accreditation system will the ESRC will lose its leverage over the quality of postgraduate training? (Version 1)**

No. Through a more focussed DTC network, we will seek to maintain our national leadership role by providing a quality benchmark from which to spread good practice across the sector. The ESRC’s aim is to establish and communicate a national training infrastructure that brings together both the range of training offered by the new DTCs as well as that provided through the other ESRC investments such as the National Centre for Research Methods nodes and Researcher Development Initiative. The aim is for as many students as possible to have access to a wide range of advanced training and development opportunities.

**9. Given the change in the accreditation process, is the ESRC looking to change the Postgraduate Training Guidelines more generally? (Version 1)**

ESRC is not looking to revisit or change the *Guidelines*.

**10. Can you say now, with confidence, that an even geographical spread of DTCs and DTUs have been accredited across the UK? (Version 1)**

Yes. A full list of accredited DTCs will be published on our website in the w/c 31 January.

## Review Process

**11. ESRC conducted a further review. Does this suggest that the ESRC wasn't satisfied with the quality of the original peer review process? (Version 1)**

No. The decision to undertake a review of the accreditation decisions did not reflect concerns over the quality of the original process. Rather, given the potential cuts to our budget we needed to rank the applications to enable us to scale back the network to a level we can realistically support moving forward.

**12. Who carried out the further review process and how can you be sure that this was a robust and fair process? (Version 1)**

The review was carried out by a specially-convened subgroup of members of the ESRC Training and Skills Committee (TSC). The remit of this group was to apply the higher threshold for accreditation agreed by Council and to use a series of review criteria to assess the strategic contribution of each application. The Subgroup did not seek to fundamentally reassess any applications and the review criteria were based entirely on the original objectives of the framework and focussed on the following key areas:

- 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 from the TSC meeting in July 2010 in order to inform the Subgroup decisions. Where there were no issues requiring clarification applicants were not asked for further information. No applicant was allowed to alter their original application and all responses had to be limited to the specific questions asked. All applications were then ranked according to the criteria of the review and, where applicable, responses to conditions. The ranked list was used by the ESRC Executive in consultation with the TSC Subgroup to decide which DTCs should be accredited based on ensuring a critical mass of students within each DTC.

## Implementation of the Framework and Recruitment Issues

**13. Will the ESRC be considering delaying the introduction of the new framework until October 2012 to allow DTCs to develop courses and recruit students? If this is the case, will current recognition be extended by another year? (Version 1)**

No. We are still planning for the new framework to commence in October 2011. The expectation is that where institutions were proposing the development of innovative new courses they will have prepared to implement them. However, for a limited number of the large collaborative DTCs this may not always be the case, as the incentive of studentships has been

the driver for the collaboration. If accredited we will work with these institutions to agree a feasible way forward.

- 14. Normally institutions would advertise for students in the autumn of 2010 to commence study in October 2011. Given that the accreditation process has continued into early 2011, how will ESRC support us in ensuring that we continue to recruit the best students?** (Version 1)

Previously there has always been sufficient demand for student places and generally no difficulty in recruiting high quality candidates. Given the current financial climate we anticipate that the level of demand will continue and that it will be possible to recruit quality candidates. The ESRC will work with institutions that have been accredited and are having difficulties recruiting within this timescale.

### **Funding/ Studentship Allocation**

- 15. How was the decision to reduce the number of studentships available, balanced with the decision to reduce funding allocated to other areas of ESRC business, such as the grants stream?** (Version 1)

The decision to reduce areas of ESRC investment was taken by Council in light of the overall cuts to the ESRCs budget. The need for us to protect capital investments was also taken into account. In reducing the number of studentships we have been careful to ensure that our support will continue to range across the social sciences, and we will monitor the outcomes of our funding to ensure that is achieved.

- 16. How would you advise non accredited institutions to proceed with delivery of training?** (Version 1)

ESRC is well aware of the considerable effort that institutions put into their applications and would not wish to see this lost. Hence we hope that those applicants who were unsuccessful will continue to develop their training provision in line with the ESRC Postgraduate Framework and realise the potential of the innovations that they set out in their applications. The ESRC wishes to see a national training infrastructure that brings together a range of training: that provided by the new DTCs as well as that provided by other ESRC investments such as the nodes of the National Centre for Research Methods and the Researcher Development Initiative. We want to ensure that the academic community is fully aware of and is able to exploit this infrastructure. The aim is that as many postgraduate students as possible should have access to the wide range of advanced training and development opportunities that this infrastructure provides

- 17. How does the studentship allocation process work?** (Version 1)

In February 2010 applicants were sent a document outlining the process and variables for the algorithm which would determine the number of quota awards granted to each successful DTC. This algorithm has now been run and the final allocation for each DTC was communicated in their decision letters. Alongside the number of studentships allocated to institutions through the algorithm, the ESRC also retained 30 per cent of the total awards available and distributed these to DTCs in order to support excellence in a priority disciplines and interdisciplinary training, or to recognise successful collaboration. The figure is an annual allocation for the five

year accreditation cycle but will be subject to review in year three. In line with the original Guidelines, DTCs are being given flexibility to distribute these quota awards using their own internal allocation mechanism onto pathways included in the accredited bid. Details relating to the ESRC's strategic steer are outlined below in questions 18 and 19.

**18. Did the final ranking of DTC applications influence the allocation of studentships?**

(Version 1)

Yes. The applications ranked highest by the TSC Subgroup were those which made the most direct contribution to the ESRC's strategic objectives. The allocation mechanism took this into account when determining which institutions should receive priority enhancements.

**19. Did the peer review exercise influence the final allocation of studentships?** (Version 1)

Yes. The algorithm used to allocate 70 per cent of studentships was based on both quality and quantity variables and DTCs with the strongest peer review scores were therefore rewarded.

**20. Why were pathways removed from successful DTC bids?** (Version 1)

While the overall quality of the successful DTC bids was very high, in a limited number of instances a successful DTC bid contained pathways which the Subgroup judged to fall below the excellence threshold and these were removed.

**21. Is the ESRC steering studentships to particular disciplines?** (Version 1)

Yes. For the ESRC priority disciplines set out in our *Delivery Plan 2011 - 2015*, DTCs identified through the peer review process as having strong provision in these areas will be encouraged to use a certain proportion of their allocation on specific pathways. This is to ensure sufficient capacity is developed in these strategically important areas. In other areas the ESRC is allowing institutions as much flexibility as possible to allocate studentships to the best students on the strongest pathways. To help ensure that coverage of all social science disciplines is maintained, we have provided a series of benchmarks (see table below) which offers a guide as to the proportion of students that we aim to fund in each discipline. DTCs have been asked to use these benchmarks as a guide when making their own allocations. We will monitor proportions of studentships, especially in priority areas, at the annual reporting stage.



| DISCIPLINE                           | BENCHMARK (%) |
|--------------------------------------|---------------|
| Anthropology                         | 5             |
| Area Studies                         | 6             |
| Demography                           | 2             |
| Economic Social History              | 3             |
| Economics                            | 10            |
| Education                            | 8             |
| Human Geography                      | 8             |
| Linguistics                          | 2             |
| Management and Business Studies      | 7             |
| Planning                             | 2             |
| Politics and International Relations | 5             |
| Psychology                           | 7             |
| Science and Technology Studies       | 3             |
| Social Policy                        | 4             |
| Social Work                          | 3             |
| Socio-Legal Studies                  | 4             |
| Sociology                            | 8             |
| Stats, Methods and Computing         | 3             |
| Interdisciplinary                    | 10            |
| QM*                                  | 10            |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                         | <b>100</b>    |

The QM proportion is based on the number of students the ESRC would like to attract the QM enhanced stipend and it is not a disciplinary pool in its own right. The proportion could be spread across any social science discipline.

**22. What would ESRC's position be if the benchmark for studentships was not met by a DTC? (Version 1)**

There is no intention that each DTC should seek to replicate the distribution in its allocation processes and the emphasis should very much be on supporting the best students and marrying them up with the best training pathways. Nevertheless, the benchmarks do provide an important framework in which the DTCs will operate and the ESRC will be monitoring the distribution of studentships to maintain disciplinary balance across the network through the

DTC annual reporting process. Where we have concerns that disciplines are falling well below the benchmarks set, we may approach DTCs with strong pathways in these areas and encourage them to increase their recruitment to them.

**23. Why is the ESRC setting a target for the number of collaborative awards DTCs should support?** (Version 1)

The *Guidelines* emphasise the importance of collaboration with government, business and third sector organisations. It is hoped that setting a target will not only promote an important element of the new framework in supporting collaborative doctoral research, but also encourage DTCs to maximise the grant they receive through co-funding. The target of 20 per cent collaborative awards can involve both collaborative studentships (for example CASE) and other opportunities such as placements of internships.

**24. Are institutions that were unsuccessful in their bids for accreditation eligible to host project- or centre-linked studentships under the new framework?** (Version 2)

No, only accredited DTCs will be able to host linked studentships from October 2011.

However, the ESRC will honour any grant award made that included a linked student before the 21 January 2011 when the list of successful DTCs was announced. Any awards made subsequent to this where a studentship has been included in the costs will have the costs for that studentship removed. Non-accredited institutions may also apply for a linked studentship on a grant where there is a collaborating institution on the grant that is accredited and which will undertake to host the studentship.

**25. Will the annual ESRC/NERC and ESRC/MRC Studentship Competitions run again?** (Version 2)

We will not be running the ESRC/NERC or ESRC/MRC studentship competitions this year. ESRC is currently in discussion with MRC and NERC over how best to support interdisciplinary capacity building moving forward and we will make an announcement in due course.

**26. Can we appeal against the final decisions?** (Version 1)

Yes. A link to the ESRC Appeals process can be found at:

[http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/about/Contact\\_us/index2.aspx](http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/about/Contact_us/index2.aspx).

Please note that an appeal is defined as a request to vary a decision of the ESRC in light of available facts. Appeals may not be made against the judgements of ESRC Boards, Panels or other bodies taken under due procedures, unless it is argued that the judgement is perverse or that due procedure has not been followed. An appeal may be paralleled or succeeded by a complaint, but institutions making appeals against ESRC decisions should indicate separately in writing if they also wish to make a complaint.

Complaints and appeals will also be distinguished from critical comments. The last will not be treated as a complaint or appeal unless formally lodged. Please follow the link above for further information on appeals relating to the postgraduate framework decisions.

**27. When will there be another accreditation exercise?** (Version 1)

The ESRC are phasing out the accreditation process. DTC status will be awarded for five years. There will be a competition for renewal of DTC status in five years, and the opportunity for new DTCs to acquire DTC status.

**28. Will there be an interim exercise?** (Version 1)

No. It is expected that DTCs will request new or significantly amended pathways through the annual reporting mechanism; these will then be reviewed by the TSC.

## Setting up the DTCs

**29. Will the Doctoral Training Grant (DTG) be calculated based on the studentships as being +3 or 1+3 awards?** (Version 2)

The DTG will be calculated based on a 50:50 split of 1+3 and +3 awards, i.e. 3.5 years of funding per studentship allocated to the DTC. If institutions wish to fund a higher proportion of 1+3, 2+2, 2+3 or +4 awards they must use the flexibility of the DTG to cover these costs.

**30. Is the annual number of studentships allocated to a DTC the minimum number that must be funded?** (Version 2)

Yes, at a minimum the ESRC expects DTCs to support the number of studentships stated in their decision letter.

**31. Can you be more explicit as to what is expected from DTCs in terms of collaboration with other public, private or third sector organisations for 20 per cent of our studentship allocation?** (Version 2)

ESRC wish to avoid being prescriptive by simply requiring these to be CASE-type awards. Rather, we are asking DTCs to demonstrate that these studentships are being developed in collaboration with a public, private or third sector organisation and involve substantive user engagement and knowledge exchange activity as part of the award. This could be through internships and work placements or the through following the more traditional CASE studentship model. Whilst the amount of co funding leveraged may differ between awards, we would encourage institutions to seek some form of co funding for each of these studentships as this will help to maximise the DTG funds. The total amount of co funding will also be collated in the DTC Annual Report.

**32. Do the relaxed international eligibility rules for Economics and AQM students apply to all international students, including those resident in the EU who would previously have received a fees only award from the ESRC?** (Version 2)

Yes, eligibility for Economics and AQM awards includes all international students and, in these areas, EU students who would have previously received a fees only award. These students are now eligible to receive a full maintenance grant.

**33. Is the ESRC providing funding on top of the Doctoral Training Grant (DTG) to cover the costs for enhanced stipends?** (Version 2)

The ESRC will provide extra funding for enhancements to DTCs where studentships have been steered onto Economics or Advanced Quantitative Methods pathways. However, no

further funding will be provided for other students being granted enhancements by the DTC whether for Economics, AQM or collaborative studentships. If institutions wish to apply these enhancements then funds must be found from the flexibility within the DTG.

**34. What should a DTC do if it wishes to offer studentships on a different basis than was requested in the original application proposal? (Version1)**

Where approved pathways have for example, only applied for +3 status, and now subsequently wish to offer 1+3 studentships, the DTC will need to apply via the annual report for a change in recognition status, clearly identifying that have the support available within the pathway to support masters training.

**35. What should a DTC do if it wishes to offer part-time studentships on pathways where this was not requested in the original application proposal? (Version 2)**

Again, through the annual report mechanism, pathways which now want to be recognised for part-time status will need to provide evidence that they have suitable provision to support part-time students.