

BSA/HaPS response to ESRC consultation paper on Demand Management

The British Sociological Association (BSA) and the Council of Heads and Professors of Sociology (HaPS) are aware of the general pressure ESRC is under to reduce administrative costs. However, we are very concerned about the proposals to reduce demand in applications for research grant funding believing that these have not been sufficiently debated in the sector, and we urge a lengthier and more inclusive consultation process. We are concerned that, in general, one of the consequences of the proposed changes would be to shift greater costs on to HEIs. There is deep concern from our members that these measures will also reinforce the shift in opportunities for funded research away from many good researchers/departments outside a few privileged institutions. The proposed system would accelerate an undesirable concentration of research funding in fewer institutions. BSA/HaPS are concerned that this further limits opportunities for building excellence and developing research capacity in historically less research intensive institutions. We also fear it will further bureaucratize the administration of research and the setting of research priorities within HEIs and disadvantage early career researchers. We note that the problem of a 'low success does not derive from poor quality submissions, but from limited funding available to support good applications.

Individual Researcher Sanctions

There might be some merit in the proposal to apply sanctions at the level of the individual provided there is a link between the proposed sanction and the scientific quality of the submission. The appeal of this proposal is the fact that it is used by other Research Councils so has a degree of legitimacy in the research community. However, the problem that the ESRC is addressing does not derive from poor quality of submissions. The rejection of individual applications is largely a consequence of budgetary limits and not a poorly prepared application. In this context, individual researcher sanctions applied to exclude applications for a specified period would be both inappropriate and insufficient to meet the ESRC target.

Institutional Sanctions

The proposal to introduce sanctions at institutional level must be rejected. It risks discriminating against all potential researchers because of the historical limitations of some previous unsuccessful bids by other researchers within an institution. With failure rates shaped by available funding, rejection is not primarily a consequence of a poor submission, a weak submission or the research skills of applicants within an HEI. HEIs may be able to make an internal judgment of the merit of an application but they are not in a position to judge which is likely to be funded. This is a decision that is properly made by the Research Councils and their subject experts. Requiring HEIs to be more selective will not lead to improved consistency in the quality of applications as there might be a tendency for institutions to favour work that meets local research objectives.

This proposal is another example of the shift of responsibility from the ESRC to institutions with no guarantee of more robust or defensible outcomes. In addition, a shrinking pool of assessors judging applications from a shrinking pool of institutions would lead to obvious challenges to the legitimacy of the process, and would be seen as a weakening of the quality of judgements.

Institutional Quotas

This proposal is of grave concern to the BSA/HaPS. The prospect of further barriers to the range of individuals and institutions able to submit bids, discriminates unfairly against researchers in post-92 institutions and would further concentrate research funding. Quotas would reflect historical patterns of success and would reinforce existing patterns of funding rather than promote a dynamic system that was able to recognize research excellence across the sector. Institutional quotas, involving enhanced internal processes of quality control would impose further administrative burdens on HEIs and would further constrain responsive mode research by reinforcing institutional priorities over those of subject specialists. Such a transfer of administrative costs from the ESRC to institutions is unwarranted, especially at a time when institutions, too, face budgetary cuts.

Charging for the submission of applications

We find it difficult to see how this proposal would lead to substantial savings and should not be considered for further development. The bulk of the costs of preparing submissions are already borne by institutions and individuals. The logical of charging would potentially lead to demands for payment for work undertaken for the ESRC currently provided on a collegial basis. Some members have made it clear that attempts to impose a fee would greatly discourage applications from some universities, and that the fee would discourage applicants from developing research projects in new or 'risky' research areas.

The 2014 target for the reduction of applications is unrealistic. In the meantime we recommend the 'other measures' identified in the document, pending a review of how they serve to reduce applications.

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BSA Chief Executive
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