

BSA response to the HEA stakeholder consultation June 2011

What are the broader features of your organisation's work and its current relationship with the HEA?

We are the national subject association for sociologists in the UK. We have a membership of about 2,500. We operate a network of over 40 active research interest groups and specialist groups. Research interest groups range in size from about 20 people to well over 300. Membership of research interest groups do not have to be members of the BSA and helps to extend the reach of our research networks and encourage cross-disciplinary knowledge transfer. Specialist groups include including our postgraduate forum, early career forum and our sociologists outside academia group. We have a busy annual programme of about 70 events each year of which about 20 are supported administratively by staff at our office. Our annual conference is the largest event in our calendar, this year attracting 1,100 delegates. We publish four learned journals (two of which we wholly own), produce a 40 page magazine for our members three times a year. We also run a website, a Blog and have a lively Facebook following. We are actively involved in the work of the Academy of the Social Sciences and have an External Affairs Group which responds to the very many consultations that we are invited to take part in. Teaching and learning is a central part of all of our activities.

1. Why is it important for your organisation to maintain a close relationship with the HE sector overall?

The BSA is a learned society within the HE sector. The vast majority of our members are employed in HEIs and it is therefore critical to our credibility and to our existence that we maintain a close relationship with the HE sector overall.

2. What outcomes do you expect to achieve from your relationship with the HE sector?

Same as above but the "deliverables" are also two-way in that part of our mission is to seek to influence policies affecting sociology within the wider social sciences remit.

3. How important has the HEA been in your achievement of these outcomes? In what ways?

The HEA has given attention to teaching needs within the subject area of the BSA and thus helped the BSA to fulfill part of its charitable functions; it has raised

the profile of teaching and the subject area of sociology; it has facilitated research on pedagogic issues within sociology and cognate subject areas; it served as a resource network for teachers of sociology and helped in the dissemination of information and good practice.

The subject centres have played an important part in sustaining and affirming academic identity. The sociology relevant one, CSAP, has been very well run and active. Some subject centres have been stronger than others, and strong centres have performed multiple roles such as archival, representational, and educational, and at different levels including, for example, postgraduate level.

4. Are there specific outcomes that have emerged from your HEA partnership?

The HEA, through C-SAP, currently works in partnership with us to promote excellence in teaching within sociology, specifically by:

- a) Supporting an annual teaching award – the BSA/C-SAP Teaching Award. This award of £500 is open to all (not only BSA members) and aims to reward individual staff or teams of staff, and also to raise the profile of learning and teaching activity in Sociology in the University Sector through the publicity associated with the nominations. This award is jointly-funded, jointly-promoted and co-judged;
- b) Supporting a teaching, learning and professional issues stream at the BSA's annual conference. The stream is sponsored by C-SAP and sessions are populated by C-SAP grant award recipients and BSA presenters; and
- c) Co-funding specific research projects, for example on the promotion of methodological pluralism and quantitative social research methods skills in sociology

5. What do you think the main purpose of the HEA is? What should it be?

To promote excellence in teaching; to provide a network that acts as a resource, disseminates information and shares good practice; to act as champion for teaching within government and policy fields; provision of support structures to assist in improving high quality teaching.

6. What mechanisms and approaches do you use to maintain your partnership links with the HEA?

We are in regular contact with officers at C-SAP via phone, email and in person. A representative of the BSA sits on C-SAP's Advisory Board and a representative of C-SAP sits on BSA Council. In addition representatives of C-SAP have a stand at our annual conference carrying C-SAP resources, allowing the dissemination of C-SAP outputs and providing the opportunity for sociologists to engage directly with their teaching and learning subject centre.

7. Given the new structures in the HEA [*see below] how do you see these mechanisms and approaches changing?

* New structures in the HEA:

The main features:

- Government funding for the HEA has been cut by 35% overall. Transitional funding is in place for 2011/2012 (July-July) after which there will be full cut-back.
- The proportion of HEA money spent on disciplinary-related activity will be higher than at present. However, this will be a higher proportion of a smaller total budget, therefore the amount available for each subject centre will be smaller.
- Up until now subject centres were each based in different Universities and staffed by teams employed by those Universities. Typically one University housed one subject centre. This was the result of the bidding process when the subject centres were set up. This made the subject centres very difficult to manage if something went wrong e.g. if there were local problems with staff, the HEA couldn't do anything because the staff were not employed by the HEA. Now everyone will be employed by the HEA. However, this does not mean that everyone will be located at York (the HEA HQ). Staff might work from home or another base.
- Instead of 24 smaller clusters of subject centres, there will be 4 big clusters. No existing subject centres will be split up. However, they will be grouped into 4 clusters: STEM (including Geography and Psychology) / Health / Arts & Humanities / Social Sciences. The Social Sciences cluster will include: Sociology, Anthropology, Politics / Business Management Accountancy and Finance / Economics / Education / Law / Social Policy and Social Work. Each cluster will have a head. Jobs have been advertised and it expected that the four heads will be in place by mid-July. Support staff will then be recruited. There will also be a pot of money for "flexible employment" (for additional human resource needs) including the employment of "associates of subject centres" who might be

8. What suggestions do you have for the maintenance of your partnership in the new structures?

We have a strong and successful relationship with our existing subject centre in that we keep each other well-informed and deliver projects and outcomes which help us both to meet our objectives. We would look to maintain similar mechanisms (see 6 above) to perpetuate this healthy and successful experience for both parties. To do this, it will be important for the HEA to employ staff who will command the trust and confidence of sociologists. Specifically, within the new subject centre we would look for a named person with a sociology background who has strong existing networks and a shared cultural understanding.

9. What are the current key issues affecting your Association that keep you awake at night?

As a subject association CE, I am concerned about the impact that the changes in HE following the Government Spending Review in October 2010 are having already and may yet have on sociology. Specifically, I am concerned about the results of current “restructuring” within HEIs and the potential loss of teaching capacity for sociology and the results of the increase in student fees on the number of student applications to sociology degree courses.

10. What will the main risks for the HEA changes and how could they be mitigated?

We are concerned that the centralizing process may result in the loss of existing infrastructure and skills and the loss of support for subject-specific high quality teaching and the loss of subject-specific resources including, specifically the loss of the collective wisdom of subject networks that have been built up over time and, quite literally, their actual archives in some cases. Major risks for the HEA in the process of change include the breakdown of networks, loss of pre-existing knowledge, loss of trust, withdrawal of active support of the subject associations. It will be critical that in recruiting staff for the new subject centres that good appointments are made. The new centres must have charismatic, credible, knowledgeable and confident staff. They will need to go out and talk to the subject associations to maintain (or regain?) their trust. Recognition of pre-existing relationships and relationship building will be central to their success or failure. They will need to respect and remember the past 10 years of development. Key matters for concern must be to see that good outputs and relationships do not fall through the cracks in the process of change (decisions

about the continuation of support for pre-existing outputs [or not] will need to carefully thought through and communicated well to the subject associations), some assessment and acknowledgement of the impact of the potential loss of resources/capacity will be needed, there will be a need to focus on the purpose of the HEA and the maintenance of some stability in support and resources in an even-handed way and to not be side-tracked be argy-bargy. Good and regular communication with the subject associations throughout the process of change will be critical.

11. Is there anything else I should think about? Are there other comments you would like to make?

We would like to stress the importance of the subject centres as points of connection and collection, sharing, exchange, development, and cultural intervention. They have been a means by which networks can form /have formed which sustain and feed academic subject/discipline focused work including high quality, innovative, enhancement to teaching and learning via subject specific pedagogic interventions, often for remarkably little real cost. In our case, C-SAP has been perceived as being very good value.

The subject centre system provided a very specific kind of academic benefit in a very straightforward way. We wonder how the current fellowship structure will fit into the new HEA structure and suggest more active engagement of fellows.

We would like to recommend that the HEA also tries to find ways of crediting subject centre work. CPD and esteem markers are particularly welcomed by some academics, particularly those in disciplines such as sociology where chartered status does not exist.