ESRC Consultation: Informing the future strategic direction of the Economic and Social Research Council

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This response is on behalf of the British Sociological Association and the Council of Heads and Professors of Sociology. It has been prepared by Professor John Holmwood, BSA President.

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Question 1: In which areas of activity, and/or in what ways, do you judge that the ESRC currently adds most value?

We believe that the ESRC adds value through 4 core functions:

- The direct funding of research based upon the quality of the research proposals, as judged by peer-review.
- The maintenance of key infrastructure resources, such as cohort studies, panel data, etc.
- The development of research capacity in terms of funding postgraduate research and the provision of training opportunities for researchers at all career stages (e.g. via DTCs and NCRM).
- The dissemination of research engaged with pressing social issues and their social and political contexts.

We believe all four functions are vital to the health of social science research in the UK and to maintaining public value in research that meets the highest intellectual standards. We believe that reviews of research in different subjects conducted by ESRC, and other reviews indicate the high achievement of UK social science and, therefore, the past successes of the ESRC in supporting UK social science. If our response expresses serious concerns about future directions, it is because we believe the environment of higher education is rapidly changing and the implications of these changes for the 'eco-system' of social science research should be addressed as a central part of the strategic review. In this context, we are concerned that collegial bodies, like professional associations, that cover all institutions are given less account than individual HEIs that no longer have 'care' for the overall research eco-system rather than their individual positioning within it. We have a further concern that consultation with 'stakeholders' is displacing evidence-based arguments in forming ESRC strategy. The former reflects powerful interests and while they need to be represented this should not override a proper examination of research – often funded by the ESRC – into science policy. This will emerge as an issue at different points in our response.

Question 2: Looking ahead, and in the context of on-going funding constraints and our commitment to make best use of public funding, what would you like to see us doing differently, better, more or less of?

We are seriously concerned that administrative funding constraints are driving policy. Increasingly, ESRC is moving toward a dominance of 'top-down' large-scale research, rather than smaller scale responsive mode research, precisely because resources to administer ESRC activities have been cut back. We believe that this is compromising responsive mode funding and the integrity of peer-review based upon the intellectual merits of specific proposals. For us, the availability of appropriate funding committed to the administration of ESRC activities is as important as the overall volume of funding available for research. Pressures to co-fund research can compromise intellectual standards and processes. We are committed to 'balance' among the different activities of the ESRC and do not believe that there are any that can be devolved to other bodies, including HEIs. We are concerned that 'harmonisation' across research councils favours the larger councils at the expense of the smaller and that harmonisation needs to be conscious of valid and important differences among the research traditions of practices of the natural and social sciences and arts and humanities.

Question 3: What do you anticipate will be the major priorities requiring a response from social science over the next five to ten year period? Please suggest up to three priorities in each of the areas of activity set out in the table below.

We are very concerned about the consequences of setting such priorities without a clear commitment also to innovative research outside them and to its continued funding by ESRC. We notice a clear 'bureaucratisation' of research, where University research committees and managers also set similar priorities for research in a context of competition for ranking and funding (exacerbated by demand-management policies). This has 'conservative' consequences with university peer-review processes likely to constrain research towards previously identified research priorities also constraining innovative research outside 'top down' determination. In a context where the impact agenda seeks to shorten the time from 'idea to use', a possible consequence is to displace research that is genuinely innovative. We are also concerned at the implicit 'politicisation' of research priorities where these are given substantive shape in terms of, 'sustainability', 'wellbeing', 'food security', 'economic growth' and the like. It is clear that the impact agenda and similar policy directives derive from a 'neo-liberal' conception of the knowledge economy, and it is striking that the address of the problems generated by such an economy is so muted within discussions of UK research priorities. For example, notwithstanding OECD concerns about rising inequality and social divisions (http://www.oecd.org/newsroom/urgent-action-needed-to-tackle-rising-inequality-and-social-divisions-says-oecd.htm?utm_content=bufferd6b9e&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer) these do not feature in the setting of priorities for UK research. Indeed, initiatives like the 'What Works Centres' seem to prioritise research leading to change in the behaviours of low income individuals rather than research into the mechanisms of low income and changing its distribution. Much social science

research is not about individuals but on 'macro' (structural) and social and relational issues. A focus on topics defined via mainstream political agendas risks marginalising some social sciences in relation to others and displaces research which looks at these issues.

Question 4: How can we better enable interdisciplinary working in the social sciences, and between the social sciences and other areas of the science base?

We are concerned about the ESRC's apparent narrow understanding of interdisciplinary working. Elsewhere in this response we will have the occasion to refer to Gibbons (et al) *The New Production of Knowledge*, and their distinction between Mode 1 and Mode 2 knowledge production, which seems to influence ESRC policy. According to them, Mode 1 is investigator-initiated and discipline-based, and addressed to disciplinary audiences, while Mode 2 is co-produced; that is, context-driven, problem-focused and interdisciplinary. It involves multidisciplinary teams brought together for short periods of time to work on specific problems in the real world. We fully recognise the importance of Mode 2 knowledge production, but, as we have commented elsewhere with regard to other issues, we feel that there is a crucial issue of balance and that a healthy research eco-system requires a good mix of Mode 1 and Mode 2 knowledge production and facilitation of fertile relationships among them. To our mind, ESRC policies currently stress Mode 2 knowledge production with insufficient attention to Mode 1 knowledge production, the health of which is necessary to the knowledge-base of mode 2 knowledge production (see, for example, Andrew Abbott *Chaos of Disciplines* for a discussion of the 'inefficiencies' of problem-focused interdisciplinarity). To our mind, the problems are two-fold. First, insufficient attention is paid to *interdisciplinarity across mode 1 knowledges*; that is, interdisciplinary at the boundaries of subject-based knowledge production, as distinct from problem-focused applications of subject knowledges. Notwithstanding our concerns about issues of balance in the funding of disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches, we are also concerned that lack of clarity about the meanings of interdisciplinarity (and transdisciplinary, multi-disciplinary and post-disciplinary knowledges) creates problems in the peer review process introducing an element of 'lottery' into what gets funded.

Second, to the extent that this is less of a problem in the natural sciences, a situation arises where social science subjects are subordinated to natural science projects in terms of being concerned with facilitating the social conditions of knowledge transfer or uptake. We are conscious that cross council investments have brought valuable opportunities for collaboration between sciences and natural science and engineering. The EPSRC in particular has shown itself willing to fund genuine social science research within its programmes. However, there have been problems in ensuring that the social science components of these cross-disciplinary programmes are effectively reviewed which ESRC could help to resolve. EPSRC staff are not necessarily well-placed to identify the best social science researchers or reviewers. Indeed, ESRC has funded research on how to ensure that work has genuine social science research ambition as well as pertinence to exploitation of science and engineering research, which it might draw on (See, for example, Bechhofer, Lez Rayman-Bacchus and Williams (2001) 'The Dynamics of Social Science Research Exploitation' *Scottish Affairs* 36, pp. 124 – 155; Lyall et al *Interdisciplinary Research Journeys: Practical Strategies for Capturing Creativity*).

We are concerned that the failure to pay attention to these issues is giving rise to a new division within the subjects under ESRC remit between those advocating a 'behavioural science' and those concerned with social structural contexts and determinants of behaviour, precisely because some subjects are seen as having a closer 'affinity' with the natural sciences (e.g. economics, and psychology). In our view, the social problems that form ESRC priorities are best addressed via a healthy variety among social science approaches.

Question 5: In which areas of activity, in particular, should ESRC promote innovative approaches?

We are concerned that ESRC should think it can promote, rather than facilitate, innovative approaches. To the extent that innovation disrupts 'routines' of practice or understanding, it cannot be predicted and, therefore, cannot be the direct object of policy. Indeed, our concern is that the attempt to promote it would have the unintended consequence of diminishing its likelihood. The Research Councils should be funding more research in the responsive mode and encouraging the longer-term development of ideas. While we understand the political context of the impact agenda, we are concerned that the specification that *all research* must be constructed with pathways to impact in mind and that 'good practice' necessarily involves the co-production of research with potential users from its outset, can have conservative consequences for innovation. Indeed, we note that it is precisely the 'rigidity' of the impact agenda in its application to all research that has the consequences indicated at question 4 above, namely, the overwhelming emphasis on Mode 2 knowledge production at the cost of the health of the Mode 1 knowledge it frequently depends upon. We are conscious that fundamental research insights can come from problem-based research, our concern is with maintaining a healthy balance among different approaches rather than seeking to promote one kind of knowledge production at the expense of another. In this context, we are particularly concerned by the 'tightening' of the impact agenda across all activities and stages of research (something reinforced by the Hefce approach to impact within the REF arrangements), believing that a more flexible, less 'linear' and less 'tightly-coupled' conception of impact would better achieve the intended aim. In fact, we have a worry that the shortening of the time from idea to use has the consequence of producing research that is oriented to more routine and short-term objectives (see, for example, Marianna Mazzucato. *The Entrepreneurial State,* who suggests that research with fundamental significance has a longer gestation, one that is itself the justification of public funding; see also OECD's 2011 Report on Public Sector Research Funding (http://www.oecd.org/innovation/policyplatform/48136600.pdf). This is evident in the way that *Pathways to Impact* suggests that 'transformative' outcomes for research can be specified prior to the research being undertaken and that impact can be planned for in the light of the outcomes that are 'pre-known'. It is difficult to see that this could involve '*transformative research*', rather than research that sought to change behaviours amongst users/practitioners in a way that would be derivable from existing knowledge being applied to new objects.

Once again, this is an area where ESRC-funded research has refuted the linear model of research impact (among them, Bechhofer, Lez Rayman-Bacchus and Williams cited above). This is an area where an evidence-based approach to the development of strategy should take precedence over a stakeholder consultation approach raises the question over whether the emphasis on impacts.

Question 6: What value does ESRC's role in funding major infrastructure investment have for you or your organisation? How might this value be maximised?

We are happy to endorse ESRC's investments in major infrastructure, especially in the context of Big Data and the need to have reliable bases of checking and validating other sources of data that have not been produced with research purposes in mind. We are concerned that much of the current emphasis on Big Data produced as an adjunct of other purposes (whether commercial or administrative) sees it as an alternative to the 'costly' investment in data produced for research purposes. We believe the latter to be of fundamental importance, especially because it is associated with investment also in training and dissemination.

We are also concerned that the *public value* of Big Data is often confused with its potential *economic value*. The commercial use of Big Data is a potential practical and ethical risk for social science, one that may undermine public trust in social science (this is evident in disquiet over Care.data). We are committed to open social science, but we also believe that there is a risk of the 'commercial enclosure' of data once it is 're-mixed' by private organisations without a 'public value' remit. We believe that the ESRC should justify public value not just via the interests of 'UKplc', but also those of 'UKplc', that is the UK as a political and social community. We are of the view that the ESRC should be supporting critical social research into Big Data and e-social science more generally – for example, into how Big Data are shaped by the tools for creating them; how they may be used and misused.

We think that other funding policies of the ESRC militate against maximising the use of the data infrastructure. The use of secondary data, for example, reduces the 'cost' of research projects and this is a problem where a funding threshold for applications is concerned. We would also suggest that future calls under a secondary data analysis call should include specific reference to the use of 'mixed methods'. In addition, some of the uses of secondary data will be 'speculative' and designed to reframe future research questions (this is potentially a fruitful area for mixed methods). The impact agenda requires too close a connection between 'stages' in the development of research ideas and their practical uses.

Question 7: What roles should ESRC play in the development of social science capability and skills? [Please also provide input on the priority areas for developing social science capability under Q3]

We strongly endorse ESRC emphasis on skills training, especially in the context of DTCs and the re-commissioned NCRM. We are also in favour of ESRC engagement with issues of quantitative social science across the HE curriculum as part of the enhancement of postgraduate and early career skills in this area.

However, we are concerned by the wider policies of concentration and selectivity by which direct investment in social science capability benefits researchers and postgraduates at an increasingly narrow range of institutions (a form of concentration that is also geographic in nature). We believe that it is important that access to this capability should be kept as open as possible. We are particularly concerned that there are no mechanisms to monitor applications and uptake of ESRC studentships at DTCs from the

perspective of issues of widening participation (especially that of BME students and students from poorer backgrounds) and are concerned at the absence of an equality impact analysis (or analysis of the impact of funding with regards to mobility and the fairness agenda) in the commissioning process for DTCs.

We believe the situation will be exacerbated by increased levels of student debt, deterring some students from proceeding beyond undergraduate level. In addition, with the poor record of most 'selective' universities in terms of widening participation, we are concerned that the concentration of investments in capabilities and skills in those universities and their tendency to recruit to PhD places from within their own group will reinforce a tendency that is already evident. We believe that ESRC should consider the development of social science capability not only in terms of the content of skills, but also in terms of the 'lost potential' represented by those students who are displaced from the 'tracks' leading into academic and research careers. We are strongly of the view that these issues should be addressed within the re-commissioning process for DTCs and that there should be incentives for these issues to be addressed.

Question 8: How might our strategic relationships with universities and other research organisations be developed further?

We are concerned that this question is framed in ways which reflect an 'outdated' view of the ecology of the present (and emerging) system of higher education. ESRC has an obligation to the system as a whole, as do professional associations like the BSA. However, Universities are increasingly pursuing a competitive, rather than collegial or collaborative, agenda. In this context, we believe that Universities are 'competing' for funds without considering their own relationship to the system and obligation towards its health. Indeed, the idea of giving HEIs 'more autonomy in managing our [ESRC] large investments' needs to be understood in a context where this management is likely to be of a 'rivalrous' character. The issue, for us, is that the pressure toward concentration and selectivity in research funding is also occurring in a situation where 'advantage' no longer involves collaboration. The issue cannot only be about 'partner relationships' between ESR and ROs, but also the nature of the interrelationships and synergies within and across a wider system.

In the context of the recommissioning of DTCs, we are concerned about the ad hoc nature of 'collaborations' and the way in which centres of excellent research and training in institutions where social science overall fails to meet a 'threshold' are excluded from participation. We believe ESRC should give attention to ways in which collaboration can be incentivised. Two further areas of concern are the treatment of PhD students as 'income' rather than 'investment' and the pursuit of quantity (as indicators in of research environment in REF submissions) over quality. We believe that ESRC should do more to establish PhD studentships as funding membership in a research community, rather than a continuation of student-status.

Similar issues arise over key issues like open access publishing and the apparent choice of 'green' over 'gold' by most universities for social science publication. We believe that universities should have an obligation to facilitate the widest public dissemination of research, but seem to be treating it as an issue of the 'bottom line'. Differences between Hefce and RCUK approaches to open access has allowed a 'fracturing' in the

treatment of different subjects and created problems of differential access to funding for OA for different categories of staff and for staff at different institutions. It has also created a 'shock' to the system of academic publishing and to the stability of professional associations.

Finally, *we urge ESRC to work together with professional associations to address the wider issues of the new ecology of social science research and to reflect further upon its language of 'stakeholders' and 'partners' to consider their qualitatively different roles within that ecology*.

Question 9: How can we further strengthen our relationships with our partners beyond academia, particularly in the business area?

We are concerned about the terminology of 'partners', in the absence of a closer consideration of the nature of how they are distributed and the interests they serve. The ESRC is publicly funded, yet the wider public, or publics, do not appear, except as they are represented by a 'user group'. In the case of business, we are concerned that the emphasis on partner relations (e.g. within the retail initiative) has led to the funding of some research that was not justified on social science grounds, but was essentially consumer or market research that should be funded by the private sector itself. We are concerned that the language of stakeholders and partners fails to address the changing nature of civil society, for example, the way in which voluntary organisations have been drawn into the provision of services and, latterly, have been encouraged to engage with 'for-profit' providers of services. We believe that the problem is not so much the need to strengthen relationships with businesses, but to understand that *there is a weakening in the ESRC funding of research undertaken in relation to civil society audiences.* Moreover, as we shall suggest later, the way in which ESRC/Hefce policies on impact interact with University research strategies, the kind of 'partnerships' that come to be identified are those with 'elite' (national, and transnational) connections and not those with a more 'localised' and regional focus. This is an issue associated with policies of concentration and selectivity in research funding, since local and regional partnerships are more common at HEIs that are lace favoured by these policies.

Question 10: How should we engage stakeholders in identifying longer-term research, infrastructure and capacity priorities?

Once again, we are uneasy with the language of 'stakeholders' in the absence of an articulation of a broader public interest. Some stakeholders clearly regard the purpose of social science research to be the facilitation of their interests, despite the fact that they are *beneficiaries* and not *investors*. In addition, the language of stakeholders in the context of 'consultation' over the ESRC's strategic direction suggests that its directions should be *interest-determined*, rather than *evidence-determined*. We are concerned by a lack of engagement in the consultation with 'what works' in the context of science policy research into the very matters that are at issue in the consultation. For example, where is the evaluation of the research evidence about different regimes for organising scientific and social scientific research? The ESRC funds research into Science and Technology Studies and treats it as a separate subject area, yet its contribution to knowledge is not part of the determination of the ESRC's own strategic direction.

Question 11: Are there challenges introduced by the co-production of knowledge and partnership working that we should take notice of?

As we have indicated above, the language of co-production is derived from Gibbons (et al) and their ideas about mode 1 and mode 2 knowledge production. Co-production is a characteristic of mode 2 knowledge production and while they perceived the advantages of shifting the balance between mode 1 to mode 2 knowledge production toward the latter, they were also concerned to argue that mode 1 knowledge production was also necessary. To our mind, ESRC no longer takes care of mode 1, subject-based knowledge. Perhaps it could be argued that this is a responsibility of universities and QR funding? However, as we have observed in our answer to question 4 above, universities are increasingly mimicking the practices of major funders, while the REF, from which QR income derives, also reinforces an impact agenda which favours mode 2 knowledge production.

We are concerned that there are emergent processes of centralisation and top-down determination of social scientific research on the part of funding agencies and that this is also being mirrored within individual universities. *The rhetoric is of policies directed toward innovation, but the sociological conditions for research that the policies are producing are the enemy of innovation, notwithstanding the claims.*

We are conscious that co-production is also advocated as a means of empowering the subjects of research in the production of research about them. We are very sympathetic to this aim, but the other pressures in the new eco-system of HE that we have outlined above are tending to displace this engagement with the less powerful. We are concerned that 'co-production' can have conservative consequences with regard to beneficiaries/ users in civil society. Other developments are reducing the capacity of civil society actors (cuts to income, requirements that they engage in co-funding arrangements) and creating new hierarchical relationships across partnerships – see, ESRC Evidence Briefing, 'Creating Effective Partnerships with Civil Society Organisations' http://www.esrc.ac.uk/_images/Creating%20effective%20partnerships%20with%20civil%20society%20organisations_tcm8-25285.pdf. This suggests that wider public interests – for example, in social justice – and the organisations that might represent them are under threat, and is part of what we meant by the changing 'user environment' of civil society in our answer to question 9.

Bastow, Dunleavy and Tinkler in The Impact of the Social Sciences, endorse the idea of 'knowledge with' as more appropriate than 'knowledge about', but it is clear that 'knowledge with' users is also frequently 'knowledge about' their clients and not with them. Knowledge about is itself of public value. For example, we believe there to be a demand among wider publics for 'knowledge *about*' policy makers and business and not just knowledge *with* them. In our view, ESRC has a responsibility to consider *not just the 'benefit' of co-production as an instrumental justification for social scientific funding, but also the role of critical social science in facilitating public debate, including debate about the constitution of civil society itself.* Indeed, we believe that this is part of the wider message of the success of the 'Future of Scotland and the UK' funding initiative.

NOTES

Founded in 1951, the British Sociological Association promotes sociology, supports sociologists, and is the public face of sociology in Britain. The Association represents UK sociology on key bodies both nationally and internationally and works closely with allied organisations to influence policies affecting sociology within the wider social sciences remit.
www.britsoc.co.uk

The UK Council of Heads and Professors of Sociology was set up in 1998. It is open to all professors of sociology and senior academics who are heads of department or represent sociologists in higher education in the UK. The Council provides support for its members to discuss matters of common interest relating to the administration and management of sociological teaching and research.
http://hapsoc.wordpress.com/about/