



## ESRC CONSULTATION: FIT FOR THE FUTURE

### Response from The British Sociological Association to the four key questions.

**1. Do the challenges presented above around researcher and leadership development fit with your understanding or not? If not please explain why. a. Is there further evidence that should be considered? b. Are there alternative interpretations in need of review?**

Yes, the British Sociological Association broadly shares the views of this report and endorses the argument that research leadership requires specific forms of support which are not provided by more generic leadership programmes. However, we would also emphasize the need for a holistic perspective which recognizes the flow of academic talent into and out of specific research roles and is aware of the danger of this scheme indirectly creating a 'research elite vanguard' which is overly separated from managerial and organizational leadership more broadly. We also see research leadership as linked to disciplinary leadership more broadly (for instance in editing journals, playing a role in subject associations, organizing conferences) and would want research leadership to be linked to these wider considerations. Part of the need is also to support inclusivity and find mechanisms to support research leadership which offers alternatives to informal elite social networking (often highly biased on gender, racial/ethnic, geographical and age grounds), which are associated with the cultures of elite institutions and organizations. A matter of specific concern is the dominance of London and Oxbridge research networks and we think it important that these proposals are attuned to addressing this geographical bias.

**2. Would the creation of a national framework for researcher and leadership development be useful or not? a. Are there alternative solutions you would favour over this suggested approach? b. Are there gaps or opportunities missed with this proposition?**

The British Sociological Association welcomes the ESRC's concern to scale up its support for research leadership. We concur that research leadership can be neglected through the priority of supporting academic managerial leadership more generally and we agree that a hub based approach which can operate across the entire UK will be appropriate. We also agree that there should be a focus on supporting academics at all career stages, and not just early career researchers.

We would want to guard against the danger of creating an elite pathway for a few academics who have been successful in competitions such as 'Future Leaders/ New Investigators' or PIs of major



investments who might be the core of the 'Senior Leadership College'. There is a danger that such individuals will be further hothoused by these plans and might become (more of) an elite research vanguard. Such individuals will by definition be a small minority of academics and it is important for the leadership hub to have a mixed portfolio of schemes which will support many kinds of academics e.g. those who may have spent significant time on intensive teaching or academic management and may value support in adapting their skills and experience more specifically to research leadership. We would therefore welcome proposals which are inclusive, may take the form of small scale activities such as workshops or mentorship schemes, to allow many academics to benefit from the infrastructure being planned here.

We would appreciate that the mission of research leadership is kept broad. We recognise that it will be necessary to focus on research supported by UKRI but think that effective research leadership needs also to include issues such as REF management, research grant getting from many kinds of different funders (e.g. including philanthropic, charitable, EU (if this remains possible in the future) or non UKRI public sources, publication strategies etc.

### **3. What is the priority for immediate action? a. Are early career researchers the key target audience or is there a more pressing need at other career stages?**

Given that early career researchers occupy a particularly precarious part of the labour market it makes obvious sense to focus on them, however care needs to be taken in knowing how to operate in an inclusive manner since it can be difficult to know which ECR's can benefit most from leadership development. It is possible that existing schemes such as 'Future Leaders' schemes have been awarded to academics who were already on a successful career track and therefore such schemes can reproduce and intensify existing academic practices. We are aware that many institutions only allow existing junior permanent staff to apply for the 'Future Leaders' scheme and think it is important also to be able to support ECR's who do not have a permanent position, and for whom targeted support may make a tangible difference to their prospects for sustained research career development.

We believe that support should also be given to mid-career researchers who may have had significant managerial experience within their institutions to the extent that their research expertise has been neglected – so that the possibility of transition back to more focused research roles becomes facilitated. We are mindful of the way that the career logic of many institutions is for those seeking promotion to need to prioritize internal management and welcome mechanisms to allow such people to transition back to research leadership where this is appropriate.



We are cautious of the schemes which are focused narrowly on senior academics who have already been very 'successful' in research funding terms – e.g. the PIs of major investments - because we feel that there is a danger that this could encourage elite networking which could serve to lock out outsiders from being able to compete so effectively for future funding – e.g. if the content of the leadership training includes high level ESRC information such as emergent research priorities and funding schemes, this could allow such already successful individuals to retain pole position in bids for future funding. (We are mindful that large parts of major ESRC funding is awarded to existing investments).

**4. Which bodies should be responsible for taking the development of research leadership forward? a. Who would you want to see involved/represented in any new governance arrangements?**

There will be value in this scheme working, where appropriate, with subject associations such as the BSA. Subject associations can offer guidance about how conference organisation, academic publications, working with study groups, and more broadly how to use research leadership to support disciplinary leadership. Again, our concern is to ensure that this scheme will facilitate research leadership which offers wider leadership to academic communities as a whole rather than just individual career development. (Here we see ourselves as supporting the overall argument in your point 4).

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