

## Response to the Economic and Social Research Council on their future strategic direction

Response prepared by RSS Policy and Research Manager on behalf of the Royal Statistical Society.

### Background to this response

The Royal Statistical Society (RSS) is a learned society for statistics, a professional body for statisticians and a charity which promotes statistics for the public good. The Economic and Social Research Council supports data access, data research skills and infrastructure, and funds statistical research, and should influence the future of statistics for evidence-based decisions across government, academia and industry. We are glad to be able to contribute to this opportunity to inform the ESRC's future strategic direction in the following respects.

#### 1. Role and vision

- 1.1. In our view, the most important role for the ESRC, among its listed roles, should be to “facilitate world class research through critical infrastructure resources for social science, and imaginative new uses of existing data sources”. We also highly value the ESRC's role in “[developing] research capability in areas of greatest need”, and “[encouraging] interdisciplinary working in the social sciences and beyond”.

#### 2. Capabilities and skills

- 2.1. As more people are needed who can work on a routine basis with data, support for quantitative skills in the social sciences should be continue to be a priority. In universities, good groundwork has begun to develop quantitative and statistical skills, after recognition that these had been neglected.<sup>1</sup> Scope to apply these skills elsewhere are increasing, for example e-skills UK surveyed more than 1,000 employers in 2013 and found a growing need for large employers to cope with growing volumes of data, as well as an associated shortage of data-related skills.<sup>2</sup>
- 2.2. In a prior consultation we have submitted that= ESRC funding for Doctoral Training Centres has so far been inadequate, suggesting a good case to increase it.<sup>3</sup> Through advanced quantitative methods training, DTCs have helped institutions to move towards building a

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<sup>1</sup> British Academy (2012). *Society Counts: a British Academy position statement* [online]. October 2012. Available at: [http://issuu.com/thebritishacademy/docs/society\\_counts/1?e=0](http://issuu.com/thebritishacademy/docs/society_counts/1?e=0) (accessed: July 2014)

<sup>2</sup> Survey of 1051 employers, E-skills UK (2013) *Big Data Analytics: Adoption and Employment Trends, 2012-2017*. November 2013. Research sponsored by SAS.

<sup>3</sup> Royal Statistical Society (2014). *Submission from Royal Statistical Society to Review of the ESRC Doctoral Training Network*, 2 April 2014 [Pdf.] Available from: [http://www.rss.org.uk/uploadedfiles/userfiles/files/RSS\\_Response\\_DoctoralTrainingCentres\\_Apr2014.pdf](http://www.rss.org.uk/uploadedfiles/userfiles/files/RSS_Response_DoctoralTrainingCentres_Apr2014.pdf) (accessed: July 2014)



critical mass of quantitative researchers, and have increased collaborations between statisticians and social scientists through joint supervision arrangements.<sup>4</sup> We advocate building on this current model in preference to developing something new.<sup>5</sup>

- 2.2. Experiments with data are needed that cross boundaries. The research community should work together with employers to fill industry skills gaps. For example the need for certain statistical skills sets such as multivariate analysis are growing, in part due to the scope to analyse more and more data. Research students across a range of disciplines should understand statistical concepts, and should understand how to creatively apply these to real world problems.

### 3. Developing priorities

- 3.1. The ESRC should give explicit support to **longitudinal research**, so that more of the UK's development can be tracked over time. This requires longitudinal surveys to be developed, the value of which will appreciate over time. Researchers also need support to access historic data that is not readily accessible. The RSS finds for example that access to economic data which should be archived is impossible in some cases.
- 3.2. The ESRC should continue to **support administrative data-sharing** with mitigation of privacy risks. Innovation with admin data can improve access to information while carrying lower costs, compared to the expense of running surveys or asking people or firms to 'opt in', and this is an important emerging field for statistics. The ESRC-funded administrative data research network (ADRN) offers new research centres for working with government administrative data. This model should be evaluated and lessons learned.
- 3.3. The ESRC should seek to facilitate more research and data access collaborations with **commercial and business sources**. Admin data sharing could be used to make more commercial information available, and business interest in this should be assessed in addition to ways of addressing privacy concerns.
- 3.4. Making effective use of **open data**, and providing these data to a robust standard, are further matters that should be within the scope of what the ESRC supports. Skills development for data users and data providers should be a priority in addition to opening up new datasets.

*Response submitted 15 July 2014*

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<sup>4</sup> Royal Statistical Society (2014). *Submission from Royal Statistical Society to Review of the ESRC Doctoral Training Network*, 2 April 2014 [Pdf.] Available from: [http://www.rss.org.uk/uploadedfiles/userfiles/files/RSS\\_Response\\_DoctoralTrainingCentres\\_Apr2014.pdf](http://www.rss.org.uk/uploadedfiles/userfiles/files/RSS_Response_DoctoralTrainingCentres_Apr2014.pdf) (accessed: July 2014).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

